



ISUNA
HASEKURA

WOLF
&
PARCHMENT

VOL. 4

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

WOLF & PARCHMENT

VOL. 4

NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF

BY ISUNA HASEKURA
ILLUSTRATED BY JYUU AYAKURA





A YOUNG
MAN ASPIRING
TO BE A PRIEST
COL

THE DAUGHTER
OF A MERCHANT
AND THE WISEWOLF
MYURI

"DID YOU JUST CALL ME A DOG, YOU CHICKEN?!"

MYURI YELLED WITH HER EARS AND TAIL EXPOSED AS SHARON LITERALLY LOOKED DOWN ON HER, PUFFING OUT HER CHEST.

THE HAIRS ON MYURI'S TAIL INSTANTLY STOOD ON END, BUT THEN COL STEPPED BETWEEN THEM.

"BY DOGS OF THE CHURCH, MIGHT YOU MEAN THE INQUISITION?"

SHARON PUFFED HERSELF UP AND SHOOK OUT HER WINGS, AS THOUGH SIGHING.



VICE PRESIDENT OF
THE RAUSBOURNE
TAX COLLECTOR
ASSOCIATION
ELISE
SHARON

PARISH CURATE
CLARK
KOMENDA

“I HAVE HEARD THE RUMORS, YES!

BUT MORE IMPORTANT THAN THAT WAS
THE FEELING I GOT WHEN I RECEIVED A
DRAFT OF THE COMMON-LANGUAGE
TRANSLATION—I FELT LIKE MY EYES HAD
BEEN OPENED! I KNEW RIGHT AWAY THAT
THIS WAS THE FUTURE OF PREACHING!”



CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE



WOLF
&
PARCHMENT
✿NEW THEORY SPICE & WOLF✿

VOL. 4

ISUNA HASEKURA
JYUU AYAKURA


NEW YORK

Copyright

WOLF & PARCHMENT, Volume 4

ISUNA HASEKURA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Jyuu Ayakura

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

WOLF & PARCHMENT

© Isuna Hasekura 2019

First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2019 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com

facebook.com/yenpress

twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: December 2019

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Hasekura, Isuna, 1982– author. | Bernhardt, Jasmine, translator. | Ayakura, Jyuu, 1981– artist.

Title: Wolf & Parchment : new theory Spice & Wolf / Isuna Hasekura ; translation by Jasmine Bernhardt ; cover art by Jyuu Ayakura.

Other titles: Shinsetsu ookami to koshinryo: ookami to youhishi. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2017035577 | ISBN 9780316473453 (v. 1 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975326203 (v. 2 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975326555 (v. 3 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975359560 (v. 4 : paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Fantasy. | BISAC: FICTION / Fantasy / Historical.

Classification: LCC PZ7.H2687 Wo 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017035577>

ISBNs: 978-1-97535956-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9933-7 (ebook)

E3-20191028-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

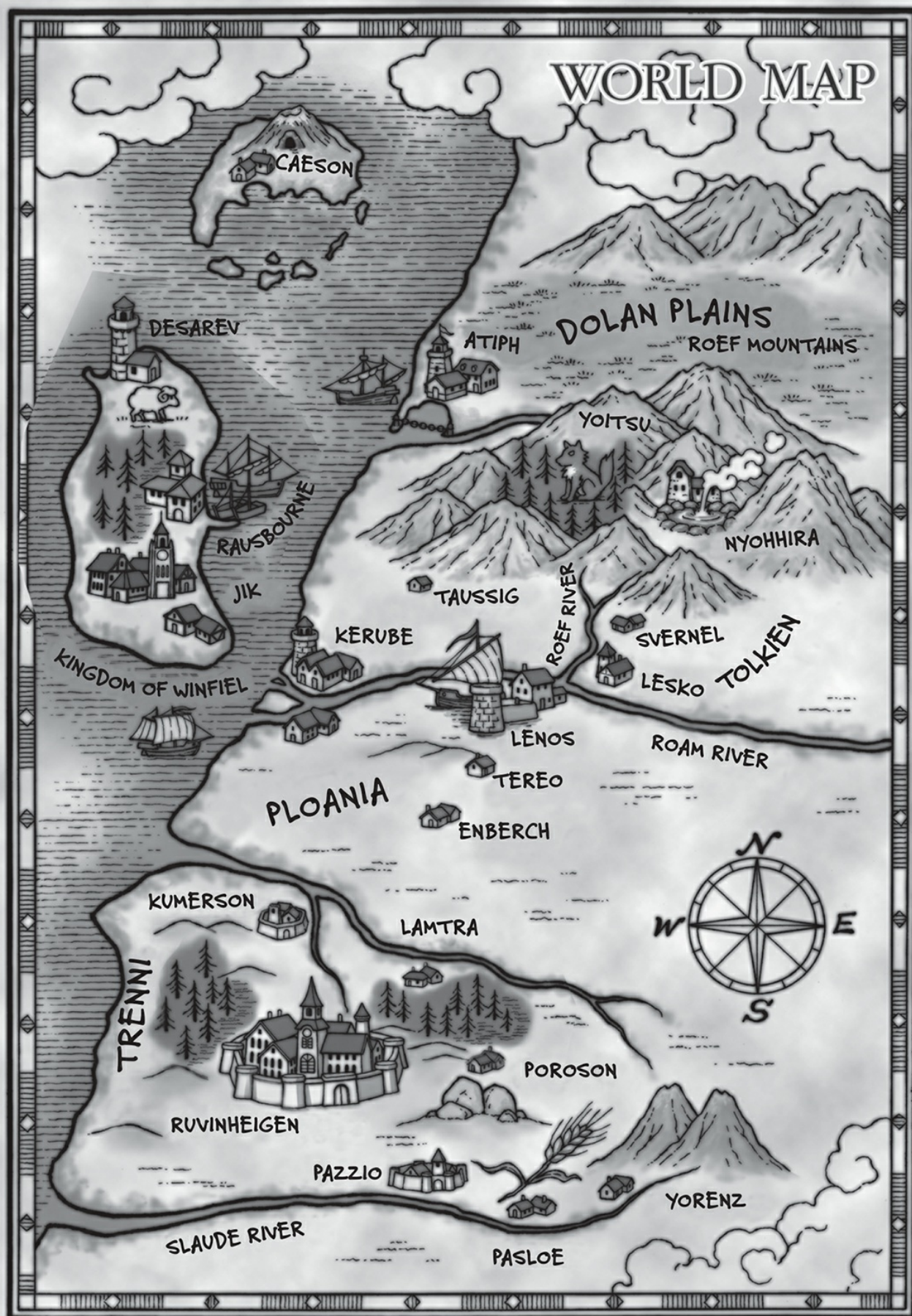
[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



Map Illustration: Hidetada Idemitsu

P ROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

We set sail from the northern islands to the second-largest port city in the Kingdom of Winfiel, Rausbourne. En route, we got caught in a storm and found ourselves in a port city called Desarev, where we uncovered crimes concerning the cathedral's treasure. It was complicated, but we worked alongside Miss Ilenia, the avatar of a sheep who we met in town, and managed to resolve the incident peaceably...Our journey is going well. Everything is fine. Tote Col.

"Phew..."

Seated at his desk, Col put down the pen and sighed. Beyond the open window, the townscape was bathed in the red of the sunset. This region was already rife with the signs spring had arrived. The night air had grown warmer as of late, which was possibly why the town was so lively.

He looked over his letter once again and found that his writing read a bit brusque. Though he considered adding more details, he did not make any move to pick up the pen again.

The letter was addressed to Lawrence and his wife, Holo, the ones who had cared for Col during his childhood when he was at his wits' end after running out of money while living as a wandering student. Lawrence used to be a traveling merchant and now ran a bathhouse named Spice and Wolf in the northern hot spring village of Nyohhira. Col had spent a good ten years working alongside them there, but he was never able to let go of his dream of becoming a priest, which led him to eventually make his way out into a world that was in the throes of the Church's reformation. Ever since, he wrote letters updating them on his progress whenever he had a chance to breathe, but whenever he did, it always gave him slight—no, tremendous pangs of conscience.

There was a good reason for that.

"Broother!"

The door flew open without so much as a knock of warning, letting in the

voice of an energetic young girl that echoed throughout the room.

By the time Col noticed the soft, hurried footsteps approaching him, two arms wrapped around him from behind while he remained in his chair.

“The festival’s getting really exciting! Let’s go, already!”

The girl had her arms wrapped around his neck and giggled as she swayed to and fro.

“C’mooon, Brother!”

The source of Col’s distress whenever he wrote his letters was none other than this girl, Myuri, the sole daughter of Lawrence and Holo and the one who looked up to Col while calling him “Brother” her whole life.

Her hair, a strange mixture of silver and ash, was inherited from her father, and her lovely reddish eyes and features came from her mother. She could easily be mistaken for a noble daughter if she acted with some grace, but either because of her youth or because she was a natural tomboy, boys’ clothes suited her incredibly well. Even now, she seemed very much at home in the outfit of a common workshop apprentice, with her hair tied roughly back...and it was at this moment that something dawned on him.

“Myuri, why are you wearing that?”

Myuri usually never wore clothes so plain. She preferred flashier outfits that Col considered a bit scandalous, both as a priest-in-training as well as her surrogate brother.

“Obviously because they said girls aren’t allowed to participate in the festival the whole way through.”

The word *festival* explained the lively commotion outside his window.

But her answer left him with only more questions.

“...Then, what were you planning on doing at the festival dressed like a boy?”

“Huh? Can’t you tell? I’m gonna help carry the fish statue up the fire path to the tip of the cape. Oh, and I told them you were coming, too.”

“You did...?”

When he reflexively responded with that question, Myuri's eyes widened.

"Well, yeah! The townspeople think it's all thanks to you that they can have a festival for the first time in years! It'd be rude if you didn't show up!"

Col and Myuri were currently staying in the port town of Desarev, famous for its festival, which consisted of preparing a path of burning firewood that led uphill to the promontory overlooking the town, carrying an effigy of a fish all the way to the top, then finally conducting a ritual at the cathedral there to send the fish off to heaven. This festival was the relic of an ancient time, persisting even after the fishing industry had become much more prosperous and the teachings of the Church had spread.

For the past few years, all that had been put on hold as the standoff between Kingdom and Church worsened.

The cathedral, official organizer of the festival, had kept its doors closed for three long years, and the archbishop, of all people, had the gall to abandon his post before running away. The only one left in his stead was a former shepherd who looked just like the archbishop and occasionally filled in for him during services. Further complicating things was an incident that soon arose revolving around the smuggling of the cathedral's treasures...which was the point where Col and Myuri became involved.

It was only about ten days ago when they finally uncovered who was stealing and selling off the treasures. After they resolved the issue, the ex-shepherd-turned-fake-priest awakened to his newfound faith and announced that he himself was the archbishop and proposed an amicable settlement with the town.

As wonderful as reconciliation between church and town may have been, the Kingdom and the Church were still diametrically opposed to each other, so there had been some uncertainty as to how things would turn out. On top of everything else, not only was the man calling himself the archbishop a fake, he actually made that fact clear to all the townsfolk.

These circumstances made the results all the more surprising.

The townsfolk had long been aware an imposter had taken the real archbishop's place, and they rather liked the sincerity of this fake—of this

former shepherd. In the end, the talks went disappointingly well. There had been no need for Col to put in a good word for him. After all, the ex-shepherd's character was well respected by the townspeople and they didn't harbor any meaningless grudges against the clergy as a whole.

When the lower-ranking priests in town realized this, they also reportedly began to reopen their chapels and welcome people once again. The blessings of God had returned to a town in the Winfiel Kingdom for the first time in years.

It was a fine example of how sometimes even seemingly irreparable conflicts could be solved if one side simply extended a hand.

But of course, even if the town and cathedral were to make amends, there was still a mountain of things to talk about. It was a distinct possibility the main Church might not acknowledge this reconciliation. In the meanwhile, the first thing the townsfolk discussed was holding the festival, which had been canceled for the past few years, making it plain to see how trying the people's lives had been recently. It had been only four days since Col received reports of the proposal to hold the festival once again and its immediate approval.

No accomplishment of Col's could be found within this string of events, and it was arguably thanks to the actions of the town's inhabitants that faith and festivities were finally returning.

He eloquently explained all of that to Myuri, but she hardly seemed impressed by the time he finished—in fact, she was pouting.

"That's all you ever say! You need to learn how to accept people's thanks! Wait a—*Hey!*"

Myuri yelled right into his ear and reached for the letter on the desk.

"You're sending lies to Mother and Father again!"

His heart skipped a beat.

"I—I have not written any lies."

That came out faster than he wanted. Myuri narrowed her eyes and stared at him.

"You wrote about Ilenia, but you didn't include a word about our big

adventure. Write more! Why aren't you saying anything about all the awesome stuff we did even after we worked our butts off?!"

"Big adventure? How could I possibly write about that...?"

Myuri was the only daughter of the two people to whom he owed most of his life. She had been caught up in incidents that threatened their very lives countless times all because Myuri was tagging along on Col's journey. He could not even imagine how worried it would make her father, Lawrence, if he wrote honestly about everything that had happened. That was why he always omitted as much of the truth as he could to make events seem as harmless as possible.

It was true that he fretted over whether that counted as lying or not, just like Myuri had claimed. If he was really thinking about Lawrence and Holo, then maybe the right thing to do was to tell them everything and let the concerned parents know what really happened.

Though the thought had certainly crossed his mind, Col couldn't bring himself to commit to that course of action.

One reason was his lingering belief it was wrong to cause Lawrence and Holo unnecessary worry.

And the other reason was...

The cause of reason number two was staring straight at him with her red eyes.

"And you didn't write anything about us."

"Huh?"

The moment he reacted, Col heard what sounded like flapping butterfly wings coming from Myuri's head and the rustling of fur behind her.

When he looked, he saw her wolf ears and tail had sprouted.

"You didn't write about how you said that if I want to be romantically involved with you, then I need to call you something else besides 'Brother.'"

"Gwuh—"

His breath caught in his throat, and he soon found himself choking and

coughing for a few moments. It was only Col who thought of their journey as one of brother and sister, despite not being related by blood. Myuri, on the other hand, had not joined him in his travels for such vague reasons. Whether it was due to her nature as a wolf or simply the conviction that was characteristic of girls her age, Myuri pursued him with everything at her disposal.

There was no way Col could honestly pen the details of their journey and send them to her father, Lawrence, in Nyohhira, who was undoubtedly anxious about his daughter's well-being.

"M-Myuri!"

"But that's what you said, right? Though...I guess...I haven't really called you anything else, huh?"

Myuri pouted and dropped her chin onto his shoulder.

She had been saying that she harbored genuine feelings for him, but Col could not even begin to consider striking up a romance with her. It was clearly strange to call a romantic interest "Brother" in the first place, and he could hardly imagine her calling him anything else.

And so when he asked her, "What are you planning on calling me if we did end up in a relationship?" she had hemmed and hawed but, in the end, could only bring herself to call him "Brother." Old habits died hard. It was unthinkable for him to suddenly start seeing her—a person he had been caring for since she was a baby, looking after her like his younger sister for all this time—as a woman.

But of course, that hardly discouraged Myuri at all.

"Guess it doesn't matter. Oh, and make sure to say we spent a hot night under the same blanket together."

She wiggled, probably because she thought she was saying something alluring. Myuri was unparalleled in her innocent, childlike cuteness, but she still had a long way to go when it came to being seductive.

Col replied calmly and coolly.

"I will agree it was rather hot, but that was because we were locked in a small

room that had been set on fire.”

“I’m burning with passion is a thing people say, right?”

Col sighed when Myuri giggled, then replied, “Either way, I cannot write that.”

“Sheesh, you’re so shy, Brother!”

Myuri didn’t even bother pretending that she was teasing him, instead rubbing her cheek against his as she wagged her tail. She was the very image of innocence, the cutest little sister in the entire world...and as he rubbed the spot between his eyebrows to allay his thoughts, he heard a soft groan of confusion come from Myuri.

“Hey, Brother? Why didn’t you write anything about the edge of the western sea?”

Her tone was serious, devoid of jokes or mischief.

They had heard about the edge of the western sea from Ilenia, the sheep avatar who had joined Col and Myuri to chase after the culprit behind the cathedral treasure smuggling just the other day.

There were legends that said by sailing due west across the sea from here, a whole new continent could be found. Ilenia’s grand dream was to create a country just for nonhumans there.

“Shouldn’t we tell Mother about the land across the sea?”

“I don’t know...”

Myuri’s mother, Holo, was called the wisewolf, a being with a centuries-long life span. She appeared perpetually young, which made it difficult for her to live in any one area for an extended period of time. Even Myuri, who could hide her wolf ears and tail, had difficulties living in the human world. Talk of this new land was likely something that should be shared with Holo, who was very similar to the spirits of old.

But Col thought it would be better not to say anything.

“If we aren’t careful when we tell her about what’s beyond the western sea and Mr. Lawrence gets wind of it, what do you think would happen?”

Myuri looked blankly at him and tilted her head.

“What?”

“This is Mr. Lawrence we’re talking about. There’s no doubt he would give up anything and everything for Ms. Holo—he’s liable to do something like organize a host of boats to take her to the land in the west, isn’t he?”

“Yeah...”

Lawrence and Holo had a reputation in Nyohhira as a couple of lovebirds, but their intimacy was probably stifling from their daughter’s perspective.

“Besides, Ms. Holo prefers a quieter lifestyle and Mr. Lawrence always manages to put himself in harm’s way when it comes to adventuring. Isn’t that right?”

He did not think he was in any place to talk, but then Myuri’s ears started twitching.

“You’re right. That’s why Mother told me it’s important to keep a tight grip on the reins of foolish males,” she said and squeezed her arms around his neck even tighter.

He was not going to bother guessing what that meant.

“That is why writing about the land across the sea would only make her needlessly cross with us. Can’t you just imagine her glaring at us, saying, *How dare you fill my husband’s head with such unnecessary information...?*”

Myuri frowned.

“I can. I really can.”

“That’s why we keep it a secret for now. We shall tell her when the time is right.”

Compared to her life span, the time Holo could spend with Lawrence would be over in a flash, like the blink of an eye. The last thing Col wanted was to interrupt their relatively brief time together.

“Heh-heh, and that means we get to keep another secret between us, Brother.”

“What?”

“We just keep adding to the list of things we can’t tell Father, don’t we?”

Myuri’s choice of words sounded rather immoral, which seemed to delight her more than anything.

With a resigned smile and sigh, Col grasped Myuri’s arm and shook it lightly, as if it were a door knocker.

“Why don’t you stop talking about silly things so we can start getting a move on?”

“Hmm? Where?”

“What do you mean, where?”

He smiled when he saw her astonished face and rose from his seat.

“The festival, of course. The sun is just setting. I heard things will really get lively once the sun goes down. Isn’t that right?”

“Oh! I forgot! Yeah, we gotta go!”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

When Myuri tugged on his hand, he followed obediently, letting her pull him along.

The letter to Holo and Lawrence still sat open on the desk.

While he ultimately couldn’t bring himself to be completely honest with them about recent events, the message was still written with the utmost consideration for them.

All he could do now was believe that was the best thing to do.

“Brother?”

“Oh, sorry. More importantly, we’ll need lots of energy for the festival, won’t we? Why don’t we find something to eat at the food stalls?”

“What?! Meat? Can I have meat?!”

The only thing getting seduced was Myuri’s appetite.

One part of Col hoped she would grow up quickly and act her age while

another part wished she would stay the same way forever.

“Be careful not to eat too much.”

“Okaaay!”

He smiled—there was no use trying to rein in her excitement when her eyes shone like that.

Plus, he didn’t think that scolding her was the right thing to do.

“Look, look!”

She tugged on his hand, but that must not have been enough for her, because soon after, she clung to his arm and pulled him forward.

There were more people out on the town as the sun set—it was lively.

“This way, Brother!”

Col let Myuri drag him along, voicing his assent.

This only reinforced his hope that instead of venturing into romantic territory, their relationship would just stay the same, as brother and sister.

They made their rounds among the stalls, and when he saw how Myuri beamed at him while clutching three skewers of meat, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Isn’t this fun?!”

Squinting as he drank in her dazzling innocence, he simply nodded.

CHAPTER ONE



CHAPTER ONE

A day had passed since Desarev's lively festival.

Even before dawn broke, Col followed Myuri's lead as they quietly exited the Debau Company room they were staying in.

Dressed in their traveling clothes and with their rucksacks on their backs, they tiptoed down the hall. Myuri kept an eye on their surroundings, using her toe to poke at floorboards that might make noise before striding over them as they weaved through the complicated interior without getting lost in the dark. Their last obstacle was the loading area, where the apprentice boys slept. After passing through there, they finally managed to make it outside without anyone noticing.

They peered back through the darkness at where the Debau Company trading house stood, looking at the place that had been their home during their time in Desarev.

There was no master of the house for them to say their good-byes and thank-yous to anymore. Since the head of this branch office had turned out to be the criminal responsible for selling the cathedral's treasures in secret, the president of the Debau Company, Hilde, dealt with the aftermath of the incident by taking him to the company's main office.

And so, while Col felt a bit coldhearted leaving like this, he had still left behind a letter thanking the company workers for their hospitality and explaining that they were leaving to continue their journey.

"The escape was a huge success."

Despite how this was normally the time of morning when Myuri would be in a deep slumber that no amount of shaking or smacking would be able to end, her eyes were brightly twinkling. Whenever she spoke, it was not only her fangs that stood out from her mouth but white puffs of smoke—and that was because as winter came to an end here in Desarev, in came the humid, warm air

from the mainland.

This situation was irresistibly dramatic for the girl who adored tales of adventure.

“It feels somewhat wrong to leave without saying anything.”

“Yeah, when people say *leaving on a journey*, I always think of a whole send-off with gifts and stuff. Oh well.”

“I’d rather not have that,” Col said with a sigh, and Myuri responded only with confused grumbles.

The people in this town called him the Twilight Cardinal.

Tensions between the Kingdom and the Church had been escalating for the past few years, the conflict causing the flame of the Church to vanish from the Kingdom. And it was in this state of deadlock that Col had gallantly appeared—a wandering priest who bathed the people in the light of faith, like the coming of dawn.

That was how the people saw him, but he thought it was far too much of an exaggeration.

He was just a humble servant of God—and not even a full-fledged priest yet.

“I think you can be more confident about it, Brother.”

“Either way, they are no doubt overestimating me. This is in my nature anyway.”

While the scripture spoke of the virtue of humility, and he did believe that was what he should strive for, the truth was he simply did not enjoy being the center of attention. He always felt like he was doing something bad when people looked to him with respect, calling him things like the “Twilight Cardinal.” He did not think he was that wonderful a person.

“Well, I guess I wouldn’t wanna see the pretty girls from town give you bouquets and kisses at the send-off anyway,” Myuri said, as though doing her best to sound more grown-up.

Despite how she constantly called him names and harshly criticized him, Myuri was prone to get jealous over the smallest things that might take her

brother away from her—a habit Col found cute in its own way.

“I bet your face would get all red and you’d totally panic. I feel like I’d be embarrassed just watching you.”

On second thought, Col hated that he could never say anything in return.

“I swear...”

“Heh-heh. But you know I love that part of you, right, Brother?”

“...Yes, yes, thank you very much.”

“C’mon! I mean it!”

As they chatted, the pair walked together through the foggy nighttime town toward the port.

Then something occurred when the scent of the sea began to tickle their noses.

The fishing boats had just left for their morning run, so while a few lanterns were lit here and there, the port was mostly quiet and still.

There stood a figure.

“Oh, Ilenia!”

Myuri dashed off and leaped toward the figure. Ilenia, who had appeared from the murk, was just a bit taller Myuri and distinguishable by her fluffy jet-black hair.

Ilenia was also dressed in traveling clothes with a large trunk at her side.

“You’re coming with us, right?” Myuri asked, and Ilenia could only offer a troubled smile in response.

“Erm...”

“Come now, Myuri. Don’t ask Miss Ilenia awkward questions.”

“Awww...”

Ilenia was the embodiment of a sheep, using her unique traits to broker wool. She was dressed for travel because she was heading farther inland to purchase wool. Apparently, there were impetuous places that had already started

shearing their sheep for spring.

“We’ll see each other again soon, Myuri.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

In contrast to Myuri, who was slender and resembled a young boy more than anything else, Ilenia had a softness about her that gave off the impression of a grown woman. It was truly heartwarming to see her embracing Myuri as the girl clung to her.

But during the commotion just a few days ago, they’d learned Ilenia was not the harmless sheep she appeared to be at first glance.

This girl was a *sheep in sheep’s clothing*.

“We’re gonna help you out when you go to the edge of the western sea.”

“Heh-heh, of course. That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.”

Ilenia was chasing a dream in earnest that even the grandest visionary would shy away from.

She wanted to create a country for other nonhumans in the new land that supposedly existed at the edge of the western sea.

The reason a wolf like Myuri could so openly allow a sheep like Ilenia to dote on her was undoubtedly because she understood the older woman’s strength. It was even more likely that Myuri thought of Ilenia as someone stronger than herself.

After all, Ilenia was Myuri’s very first nonhuman friend.

“And you were on your way to Rausbourne, isn’t that right?” she asked.

“Yes. We have someone we must meet there,” Col replied.

There, Hyland, his employer and a noble of royal blood, was waiting for him.

Col’s ultimate goal was to devote himself to reforming the Church, and since the Kingdom of Winfiel stood under the same banner of reformation, he was currently working under Hyland in service of the Kingdom.

According to Hyland's letter, she planned to introduce Col to one of the people near the top of the Kingdom's power hierarchy, the first in line for the throne—once he and Myuri reached Rausbourne.

It was not often that someone received a chance to detail their path of faith to the heir of a nation. This opportunity might even bring greater momentum to the Kingdom's fight to reform the Church. Unable to conceal his rising expectations, Col's response to Ilenia's question ended up sounding more excited than he intended.

Ilenia maintained her soft composure as she smiled at him like an older sister.

"I would personally prefer if you helped me with my plans instead, though..."

At the same time, Ilenia was trying to curry favor with the prince who stood second in the line of succession. Hyland had once claimed this noble was not only a dishonest person but also one of her enemies, who was willing to claim the throne by force.

But perhaps it was his very character that was responsible for the curiosity that sparked a unique interest in entertaining talks of a land beyond the western sea—talks that anyone else would have treated as a fairy tale. Ilenia was trying to rouse this prince to organize a fleet for a preposterous adventure.

"We will of course give that matter serious consideration."

Ilenia nodded after hearing Col's remark, then loosened the arm she had wrapped around Myuri and showed them a delicate smile.

But with a serious glint deep within her eyes, she said, "The southern part of the Kingdom is geographically very close to the mainland. Rausbourne, especially, is the second-biggest city in the country. Its long, rich history and wealth are leagues beyond what you see here. The fight with the Church will likely be relentless there."

The region they were currently in was roughly referred to as a part of the northlands. It was not too long ago that heathens lived their lives out in the open there, and there remained a strong pagan influence in the area. The festival from the day before was just one of many examples.

The farther south a traveler went, the more the Church's influence grew, as

did the number of people and the size of the cities.

The more things hanging in the balance, the greater the scale of the conflict.

“Yes, I am aware.”

While Col sounded confident in his response, it was partially a lie. He had heard only smatterings of rumors on the topic here and there, meaning that his understanding was based on little more than logic.

Still, he had no choice but to go for the sake of his ideals, and Ilenia knew that.

The sheep girl nodded with a smile.

“You have Myuri with you, so you’ll be all right.”

“Yeah. Brother can only ever see a tiny part of what’s right in front of him. If he was alone, I’m sure he’d fall straight into a hole. But I’m here, so no worries!”

Myuri said that all the time. The world was full of men and women, but he knew nothing about women, so at best, Col was only half-worldly. And since he only ever saw the good in people, that left half of a half.

“That’s only true when your attention hasn’t been stolen by a tasty-looking snack.”

With Col’s retort, Myuri pursed her lips and puffed out her cheeks. Ilenia chuckled and wrapped her right arm around Myuri’s shoulder, then did the same to Col with her left.

She pulled them in, and all three of their foreheads touched.

“Please have a safe journey. I am truly grateful to have met you both.”

“I-Ilenia...”

Rather than an emotional response to Ilenia’s remark, Myuri’s murmur of protest had been drawn out by how close Ilenia’s face was to Col and how flustered he had become. She was worried her prey might be taken from her.

“Heh-heh. I think I might even travel alone with Col if you’re ever not around, Myuri.”

“Y-you know you can’t do that. Not even you, Ilenia!”

“Of course.”

Ilenia looked at Col with a cheeky smile, then let go.

“Well, prolonging my departure any further would disqualify me as a traveler.”



Ilenia lifted the heavy-looking trunk over her shoulder as if it was nothing.

“Ah,” she paused and said. “I almost forgot something important. An acquaintance of mine is a tax collector in Rausbourne. She was the one who taught me about the structure of taxes. Her name is Sharon.”

“Miss Sharon?”

Ilenia, with the trunk on her back, smiled in delight.

“Yes. I believe she could be of help in your reformation of the Church, so please reach out to her.”

“We will.”

This Sharon surely wasn’t human, but it would still be a great help if they could forge a connection with a tax collector regardless.

“Well then. The sun will be rising soon. I’ll see you again.”

On that note, she walked off briskly. The fog around her was thick, and after just ten steps, Ilenia’s soft black hair was nothing more than a silhouette. Myuri watched the entire time as Ilenia’s form vanished, looking as though she might run after her at any moment, but she stood still, her hands clenched.

Parting with friends made along the way was an inevitable part of life on the road. This was a first for Myuri, but she was doing her best to accept it in her own way.

She patiently waited to digest the reality of the separation.

And the daughter of Holo the wisewolf had most certainly inherited her blood.

“We need to go, too, Brother.”

Despite looking like she might cry if he prodded, Myuri spoke with a smile.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

It was usually Myuri who reached out to take his hand, but this time he took hers.

She looked up in slight surprise, then immediately squeezed back with all her

might.

But she did not cry.

The young maiden had taken another step toward growing up.

“I wonder what sort of town Rausbourne is.”

They once again stepped on board the ship that had taken them from the northern islands and greeted the captain, Yosef, along with the rest of the crew. There were no other passengers on the ship, and they were the only ones in the hold.

That being said, the crew must have seized a business opportunity in town, since the hold was full of cargo.

“Is it a big city?”

Only the faintest traces of light filtered through the window cut into the hold. Dawn was close.

It faintly outlined Myuri, and that was how Col noticed her wolf ears and tail were out.

There were no other guests, and the crew rarely came down, so it wasn't a problem.

“Yes. It is the second biggest in the Kingdom, and I hear it's a bustling place.”

“I hope they have good food.”

When Col sat down, Myuri eagerly nestled between his knees. He thought she might want some attention after parting with Ilenia, but her body temperature was rather high—she was probably just sleepy.

“I'm sure they do. We can't afford to waste any money, though.”

He patted her head, causing her tail—which she was using as a blanket—to rustle.

“You're always so mean, Brother,” Myuri muttered spitefully, but once she leaned slightly to the side, Col immediately heard her soft snores.

The ship set sail without waiting for the sun to rise.

May God protect us.

Col murmured quietly to himself, and he, too, closed his eyes.

The waters south of Desarev were truly calm.

As her hair fluttered in the warm southerly winds, Myuri watched with glittering eyes as the ship forged onward even as it sailed against the wind, then later admired how gallantly the sailors rowed the oars when the air currents grew too still.

Since the ship never strayed far from the coastline, they could see the landscape of the Kingdom well. It was the exact opposite of the mountain range where Myuri was born and raised; the gently sloping fields extending ever toward the horizon were an unusual sight as always to her.

But despite how awed she seemed by everything at first, she eventually stopped looking. When Col asked about it, she said it was too flat and that the sight made her uneasy. Perhaps since she was a wolf, the lack of trees and other cover to hide in was the source of her restlessness.

“Brother...are we there yet?”

Myuri rested her chin on the frame of the ship, bored.

She had been told the day before they were finally pulling into Rausbourne, so she had woken up before dawn, quickly finished her daily hair care, then stayed waiting on the deck for the moment to come.

Since they still had not arrived, she was completely bored out of her mind.

“Look, Myuri, there’s some life over there.”

Col patted the sulking girl’s shoulder and pointed in the direction the ship was headed.

While not remarkably tall, there was a cape protruding out onto the water. A wooden lighthouse sat atop the summit and a dense cluster of buildings could be seen on the land the cape jutted out from. It was a little post town with open-air stalls standing in rows along the street, cooking steam rising from a few of them.

“Awww...The other town was way more active...What’s that? It’s a small

castle...It looks like a shack compared to the cathedral in the last town," Myuri said, her shoulders sagging. It was almost as though she had already seen the whole wide world, and such child's play would no longer impress her.

But in contrast, Col, unbecoming of his age, found that his excitement was actually rising.

"That's not a castle."

"What? Then, what is it? It looks really thin and has a weird shape."

In the middle of the town at the base of the cape was a stone building about twice the height of all the other buildings around it. It was thin, just like Myuri had said, as if someone had squished the structure on both sides.

But that was a given, since that was not a place where people lived.

"That is a checkpoint."

"A checkpoint?"

Myuri lifted her eyebrows, as though she was lifting up her wolf ears, and looked to Col.

"You saw one in Atiph. There was a city wall surrounding the town and a gate set into the wall."

"Hmm? Yeah. But it doesn't look like there's any more town past that building..." she said, squinting.

"That is an entrance leading to the actual gate in the city wall. You often see them in big, old cities."

"...Huh?"

Right as Myuri lifted her head to look at Col, the ship began to bank a turn around the cape protruding into the water. The travelers at the foot of the lighthouse were enjoying the view, waving at the passing ships. There was now a remarkable number of seabirds overhead, and several ships were leaving the shore to begin their journey for the mainland.

Myuri seemed to finally notice the buzz in the air.

"Wh-wh...?"

The sails shifted, and the ship made a drastic change in course.

And then they rounded the cape.

“Whooooaaa!”

Her voice rang out, causing the seabirds above them to squawk in surprise and fly away.

Myuri’s eyes followed the ship’s heading and spotted a stunning array of buildings, pressed up against one another as if a giant had scooped them all into one spot. A magnificently tall city wall was doing its best to contain the mass of buildings, but they had proliferated, spilling out unchecked beyond the wall. They were unified by their red roof tiles, making it seem like a red spring had bubbled up from the green earth.

“Whooooaaa...! I saw mites clumped up like that in the mountains once...!”

With a sigh of admiration, Myuri accurately likened them to an odd choice of imagery, giving Col goose bumps.

However, as the ship approached, the buildings grew clearer, and the magnificent scenery stole their hearts away. Steeples were visible here and there, likely the bell towers of different churches. Only when visiting the largest cities could anyone see the rising spires of so many places of worship.

Every building was so close together that it seemed cramped, but tall, square buildings occasionally stood high above the others. They were either large manors or trading houses of larger companies. Great cities were also home to great wealth.

Either way, this place was different from the towns they’d seen in the north, not only in scale but in atmosphere. Even in the human settlements, the authority of the dark forests still influenced everyday life through the harsh conditions found in the northern lands.

But this far south, the world belonged solely to people.

This vista spreading before them was proof that when humans were allowed to run free, their potential truly blossomed.

“This is amazing! It’s incredible, Brother!”

Myuri grabbed onto Col's clothes and began to shake him in her excitement.

For a moment, he was nervous that her ears and tail might pop out, but then she took a deep breath to steady herself and fell silent, donning the odd expression of a smile while tears lined her eyes. She stared at the approaching skyline, as though she could not bear to waste even a second on blinking.

As Col watched Myuri like this, he came to agree that children should be allowed to roam from the nest.

He patted her head lightly and turned his own gaze to the approaching skyline.

The checkpoint sat at the foot of the cape because the city wall could no longer serve as a proper defensive fortification, seeing as how the overflow of buildings that had spread beyond the confines of the wall could have created the city proper of Desarev several times over.

Enormous ships, like the ones they had spotted in the northern islands, were docked off the city coast. These vessels seemed big enough to carry an entire small town, but there was no doubt that even if their holds were filled to bursting, this city would have no trouble emptying them out.

This was Rausbourne, the second-largest city in the Kingdom of Winfiel, and it had an undeniable dignity that came with being a huge metropolis.

The water off the coast of Rausbourne was less like the ocean and more like floating villages of ships.

The drafts on the largest ships were so deep that they moored far offshore, and boats of all shapes and sizes gathered around them—there were several of these clusters here and there. Small boats continuously came and went through the gaps—the spitting image of a lively town.

“I don't think Father would believe me if I told him a world on the water like this existed,” Myuri said, her cheeks red with excitement. It was certainly a sight she would have never seen in the mountains of Nyohhira.

However, Myuri's father, Lawrence, was once a traveling merchant who journeyed from one extreme region to another. But right as Col was about to mention that, he stopped himself. It would have been quite thoughtless to

point that out at a time like this.

“True. I believe he would be surprised if you told him about this.”

He imagined Lawrence happily taking Myuri on his knee as she excitedly told him all about the port. That was exactly how a father and his young daughter should be.

“Awww, I wanna get into town quickly. I bet there’s a bunch of crazy stuff happening!”

Col felt his expression softening as he watched Myuri bounce around as she talked, but he could not let his concentration relax.

“We are not here to play.”

“But Mother said, *‘Failing to enjoy everything you can is a shame,’* didn’t she? You know she’s the wisewolf, right?”

“...You cannot always use Ms. Holo’s words at times when they only benefit you.”

“Heh-heh. And I bet we’ll have a great big adventure this time because the city’s so big.”

“We are not adventuring anymore.”

“Whaaat?”

It was almost as though she was saying, *What’s the point of a journey without adventure?* Perhaps the reason she had not yet learned her lesson after enduring so many trials and tribulations was because she was still young.

“Then, what are you gonna do here, Brother?”

“I will meet up with Heir Hyland, meet with the prince, and share my thoughts with him. And then...I want to ask for Heir Hyland’s help to hold an assembly of the theologists within the Kingdom. I want to check in on the progress of the common-language translation of the scripture, and this is also a good opportunity to meet with the learned scholars of the Kingdom.”

Doing any one of those things he listed would be incredibly exciting, as well as an honor he hardly deserved.

Myuri, however, was clearly scowling.

“You’re gonna be off talking about complicated things and doing work with that book of lies again?”

“It isn’t that complicated. They will be very important talks about theology—and the scripture does not lie!”

Myuri made a big show of pressing both her hands against her ears, pretending not to listen.

It was not that unusual for a child her age to be unwilling to earnestly listen to the teachings of the Church, but she made her claims after already having read the scripture, which Col thought was rather vicious of her. And of course, the reason she had read through the scripture was to search for an excuse to start a romantic relationship with someone who was hoping to become a priest.

There was no opponent more formidable than a smart, rambunctious girl.

“*Siiigh*. If only you were as fierce as Uncle Luward, Brother,” Myuri said, disappointed, as she came closer to cling to his arm.

Luward was the name of the captain of a mercenary company who had inherited the name of Holo’s old wolf friend Myuri, but he was also a keepsake this friend left behind. Luward was openhearted and dauntless. He had a strong sense of duty as well as a sentimental side to him, which made him very popular among the dancers at the bathhouse.

When compared to a walking, real-life hero like Luward, Col could not even produce a bitter smile.

“I am but a humble man hoping to one day become a priest. That may sound plain and boring, but I believe I can do good for the world in my own way,” he said as he gazed at the buildings spreading out across the land. Myuri began to rub her face in his arm, as though she was going to bite him.

“Sheesh, all I want is for you to be a cool big brother!”

It was only times like this that she sounded as young as she seemed, but it was also only when it came to this that Col was more inclined to say their positions were reversed.

“You have shown me how cool you are on many occasions, Myuri. Is that not good enough?”

There were so many times when this silver-haired girl had helped him, supported him, and berated him.

If their genders and ages were reversed, he could imagine what an impressive older brother she would be.

Myuri had already played a part in so many different things, and there was no doubt in his mind that she would go on to be spoken of in heroic tales for generations to come.

“C’mooon, Brotherrr...”

She pulled on his arm and swayed him from side to side.

Every person had their own natural dispositions and their own paths to take.

As he deftly sidestepped Myuri, Col watched with delight as Yosef wove the ship through the crowded port, and that was when it happened.

“That ship there! You! Halt!”

Hearing the bellow of a deep voice, Col froze. The pier was right under their noses, so for a moment he thought the voice might have belonged to a pilot guiding boats deeper into the harbor, but it turned out he was off the mark. The boat that ran alongside them was small, but it bore both the flag of the Kingdom as well as a standard bearing what must have been the city emblem, and there was a certain authority to the people riding inside. Col gathered they were port security officers.

Just as he was wondering what they wanted, Captain Yosef rushed forward, and when he saw the flag flying above the little boat, he sighed.

“Bad luck. An inspection, I believe.”

“Inspection for what?”

“For taxes. Tax collection officers in the ships that bear the city emblem decide market prices.”

“What officers?” Myuri cocked her head.

“Tax collection officers are people whose jobs involve collecting taxes from people. That’s the job Miss Ilenia was doing.”

“Taxes...You mean like divvying things up, right?”

Perhaps that was the sort of impression Myuri had of taxes, being born and raised in such a small village.

“If only it was that painless. In large cities like this, they can’t inspect every ship that passes through, so instead, they often inflict penalties as a warning to the rest,” Yosef spat out. “Regardless, they are the natural enemies of us merchants. They’ll falsely accuse you and take a chunk of your load, like a shark pilfering its prey.”

Yosef, who had plied his trade in the severe waters of the north, was not afraid to openly display his hostility. Myuri, who looked up to the man as an adventurer, was completely on his side.

“Don’t let ’em beat you, Mister Yosef.”

“You can be damn sure I won’t. How could I face Lord Autumn or the Black-Mother if I let these spineless crabs from the south take advantage of me?”

Myuri grinned, her fangs showing as she clapped Yosef on the shoulder.

The ship came to a stop as they chatted, and the boat blocked their way to their destination.

“We are the Rausbourne Tax Collector Association! We will be inspecting your cargo!”

The people in the other boat called out again, introducing themselves, but Yosef muttered to himself in confusion.

“The tax collector association...? They’re not officers?”

When Myuri saw Yosef’s head tilted in confusion, she did the same and looked to Col.

“Hey, Brother? What’s the difference between an association and an office?”

“Ummm...”

He had to dig deep into his memory to pull out knowledge he had learned

long ago on his travels.

“Their job is practically identical, but their positions are different.”

Tax collection officers were public servants and performed various duties like collecting taxes from travelers who passed through the city walls. Since they also served as monitors who were supposed to prevent suspicious individuals from entering town, it counted as official work administered by the city council rather than a guild organized by upstanding citizens. Drifters bid on the rights for collecting other types of taxes, and they made their collections by relying on their own individual wit and skill, much like Ilenia had been doing.

And so an association for tax collecting itself was an oddity. That was because in order to create an association or guild, it required the participation for an extended period of time of those who all worked in the same field and also lived in the same town.

It was possible there were thousands of collection letters in circulation due to the sheer size of the city, which would mean the collectors were not drifters but proper residents all in the same tax collecting profession who had come together to create the association.

“Well, they’re bearing the city standard, so I doubt they’re fake...Hey! Lower the ladder!”

The crew obeyed Yosef’s command and unfurled the rope ladder.

It was not long before people dressed like warriors climbed aboard, one after the other.

Of course, since they were on the water, none wore heavy metal armor. Instead, they came battle-ready with leather breast pieces. Looking at their gear, Col thought it was a bit much for self-defense even if it was true there were plenty of rowdy sailors out there. These people looked less like tax collectors and more like soldiers—in essence, this was what collections officers working at the city wall would look like.

“Where’s your captain?” asked a man with a red cloth wrapped around his right arm. His great big beard seemed to project an air of importance, which made it likely he was in charge.

“That’s me. Hey! Bring out the cargo manifest!”

“We are the Rausbourne Tax Collector Association. We have been granted the right to conduct business under arms by the city council, and we act under privileges granted by the Kingdom. Know that our words are the words of the king, and our commands are the king’s commands.”

“We are but a humble trade vessel. I doubt His Majesty would find fault with us.”

“That is for us to decide.”

That last remark sounded so threatening, it made Col nervous, but things proceeded smoothly, as though everyone was used to it. Yosef presented the documents that proved the origin of all the cargo, and the bearded tax collector looked them over. Then he began doling them out to his subordinates, who each took a piece of parchment and went down into the hold.

The rest of the crew watched from a distance in discontent.

“Well, it sounds like the tax collectors in this town are acting as an association, is that right? You don’t often see that in the north.”

With nothing else to do, Yosef broached the subject as though it was small talk.

“It’s been like this for a few years. More and more people were turning their backs on the king’s orders and refusing to pay their taxes. This was especially a problem because we are a city open to the sea. Plenty of odd sorts drift in with the seawater. We tax collectors needed to band together to deal with matters.”

The bearded collector spoke like a proud specialist. The jobs people had taken on in their spare time in Desarev, like Ilenia had done, were conducted on a much grander scale and capacity in a city as busy as this.

Once he handed out the last piece of parchment to one of his underlings, the bearded merchant turned to Yosef with overt hostility.

“So you came in from Desarev. You sure have a lot of cargo from the Debau Company. Judging by the ship’s form, I’m guessing it originally came from the north?”

“Yes. We were caught in a storm along the way and got blown off course to Desarev. We don’t typically come this far south, but we are here to drop off some people.”

“People,” the collector said and whirled around.

His gaze landed right on Col.

“Him?”

“Yes. He is well-known in the north, a great—”

Then something happened right as Yosef was about to make exaggerations again. Col had barely registered in his mind that Myuri had stepped in front of him when he saw the tip of a spear thrust before Yosef’s chest.

That was when Col finally realized that people bearing short spears had appeared on either side of him.

“Um, what...?”

He tried to ask what was happening, but of course no one answered. Instead, they stared at him with fierce glares.

“What are you doing?! Do the tax collectors in this city have no manners?!” bellowed Yosef, barely paying any mind to the spear thrust before him. The bearded tax collector only glanced at him, jerking up his chin.

“Take them away.”

“Walk.”

Someone pushed Col from behind, and he stumbled forward. Myuri immediately howled with a look of rage.

“Don’t touch my brother!”

“Wha—!”

The tax collectors recoiled when they were confronted with the force of a wolf. However, Myuri looked just like a regular little girl.

Seeing that the men had quickly recomposed themselves and raised their hands, Col unconsciously brought Myuri into his arms to cover her.

“Be gentle. She’s just a child.”

Myuri writhed and raged in his arms as though she was ready to bite off the heads the enemies surrounding them, but they had to avoid making matters worse.

Besides, since they were association members and not government officials, that meant Col and Myuri had a connection they could call on.

“Could you contact Lady Sharon of your tax collection association for us, please?”

When he brought up the name Ilenia mentioned, the tax collectors stopped in their tracks.

Col knew that if it turned out they had an acquaintance among the collectors’ ranks, they would not treat him and Myuri too roughly, and they would get a chance to resolve any misunderstandings if there were any. Also, since Ilenia was the one who’d brought her up, this Sharon was likely not human, which was another opportunity to convince her to take their side.

Wanting to probe deeper, the bearded collector asked, “...You know the association vice president?”

Col was surprised to learn the name they had been given belonged to such an important person, but he responded without getting flustered.

“We learned of her from a wool broker named Miss Ilenia in Desarev. I believe if you mention her name, she will let us through.”

There was also the option of relying on Hyland, but they needed to be careful. That was because the great number of tax collection permits being issued within the Kingdom was being done so in opposition to the Church and on the authority of Heir Klevend, second in line for the throne. Given the circumstances, it was best to think of Rausbourne’s tax collection association as a faction aligned with Heir Klevend. In contrast, Hyland was supporting the heir who was first in line for the throne.

If he brought up her name, things might become even more complicated.

“...Fine. Either way, you’re coming along with us. The vice president is at the

port as well.”

On the bearded tax collector’s signal, the others withdrew their short spears.

“Very well,” Col responded and released Myuri so she could follow along, but the other collectors stopped him.

“You’ll be coming alone.”

Separating the party was a standard tactic to control people.

“Why—?”

Col held back Myuri right as she was about to scream and whispered in her ear.

“Heir Hyland.”

And so he had to prepare the next best plan.

If things started to go south, then they would rely on Hyland’s intervention.

Myuri understood his intentions right away; she turned around and frowned. He was not sure if that was because they could not go together or simply because she wasn’t fond of Hyland. It might have been both, but when he signaled she should stay with Yosef, she reluctantly complied.

She looked at Col spitefully—she would probably give him an earful later.

“Now, this way to our ship.”

The bearded tax collector gestured the way, and Col obeyed with a nod.

He climbed down the ladder and stood on deck; only the bearded collector came down, who then gave orders to the rest of his subordinates.

“Take the ship to port and inspect the cargo.”

“Sir!”

And without even pausing to let anyone sit down, the small boat set off. The closer they got to the docks, the shakier it became on board, since that was inevitably where all the waves made by the other ships ended up.

There were plenty of people out and about around the docks, and more than a handful of people looked on with curiosity.

“Come up.”

The boat soon arrived at a pier designated for smaller vessels. Col stumbled as he stepped off. As he climbed the stairs leading to the docks, his stomach panged with nerves. Waiting for them there were about ten people, all wearing the same outfit as those who had boarded Yosef’s ship. Of course, this whole group was also armed. Behind them was a massive wall of people.

Perhaps Col had gotten caught up in something bigger than he imagined.

As he gulped, the bearded tax collector walked ahead, slipping past him, and approached one specific person.

This figure had long, rust-colored hair tied back and a slim physique. They wore a green jacket with a leather belt that suspended a thin short sword. Col could tell right away from the appearance alone that this person was of considerable standing within the city. But on the other hand, the boots were rough and went up to the knee, which suggested they were someone in a position that spent a lot of time walking outside and giving orders.

And this person’s piercing gaze had a unique quality to it.

In short, this was very likely the Sharon Ilenia had mentioned.

“What? Ilenia’s?”

After the bearded tax collector whispered into her ear, the person who was very likely Sharon raised her voice. When Col imagined the vice president of an association, he had assumed it would be a man, but this was a woman. He was surprised that a woman as young as her held a position so important within the association. That meant she must possess quite the talent.

“Understood. At any rate, it doesn’t seem like he’s our enemy.”

Hearing that, the armed tax collectors immediately stood at ease. Col was relieved that things did not seem like they were going to get messy, but it bothered him how cautious they were acting.

Had he not mentioned Sharon’s name, he would have been treated as a criminal.

The young woman, probably Sharon, stepped forward to stand before Col.

“Elise Sharon.”

She stuck out her hand, so he gripped it back, noticing it had an odd feel to it. It was not as soft as a regular girl’s hand would be, but it was not as rough as those of an artisan. And her eyes.

They were not simply piercing—there was a strong, peculiar glint to them that only unblinking eyes could produce.

Then it struck him—she was a bird.

Sharon was the embodiment of a bird.

“My name is Tote Col.”

“I know,” Sharon said, then tugged on his hand to pull him in closer and leaned into his ear. “You’re the Twilight Cardinal.”

As he hesitated in his response for a few moments, Sharon continued.

“I got Ilenia’s letter. A friend of mine should have followed the great whale to deliver my own letter as well.”

He understood now.

“I have been called that, yes. I believe it is far beyond what I am worthy of, however...”



“Hmm?”

Sharon narrowed her eyes at him, but she then stepped back and let him go.

“Well, enough of that. You should have a friend with you.”

“Yes. She’s on the ship right now.”

“I see.” Sharon spoke and for a brief moment looked away, as though thinking about something, before looking back at him. “I heard you were working under Lord Hyland.”

Her gaze seemed unfriendly not simply because of her piercing eyes.

Anyone who reached the position of vice president of an association had to be aware of political undercurrents.

“You are in an odd position.”

“I am aware.”

As someone who was hoping for a reformation of the Church, Col was emotionally on the same side as the tax collectors, who were trying to get back all the assets the Church had unjustly hoarded. However, the one in charge of issuing the collection permits was Heir Klevend, second in line to the throne. He stood in direct opposition to the heir who stood first in line to the throne, whom Hyland sided with. On top of everything else, Heir Klevend was apparently not issuing permits simply to penalize the Church. According to Hyland, he was actually amassing capital in a bid to usurp the line of succession.

It was hard to separate people into the black-and-white categories of friend and foe, yet their goals oddly overlapped. That was why Sharon did not look at him as a compatriot yet still said the following: “We want to use your reputation.”

This was not a request for cooperation but the proposal of a merchant who was familiar with dealing in rough trades.

At that moment, the bearded tax collector approached them.

“Vice President, I advise you to not stay here for too long.”

“...You’re right,” Sharon responded, then turned to her fellow tax collectors.

“We’re heading back to the association hall. People from the Church will come if we stay here. You come, too. We need to talk.”

As Sharon was about to walk off with the rest of them, Col spoke to her in a fluster.

“Are you avoiding people from the Church?”

In Desarev, various problems had arisen from people of the Church staying holed up in the cathedral.

Col briefly thought that having a chat with them if they were going to come all this way would be a good idea, but Sharon turned to look at him, her brows knitted scornfully.

“You came to the city without knowing what’s happening?”

After a brief display of irritation, she walked off.

“Just come.”

Col could not even guess what was going on, but at the very least, it did not seem like Sharon was an enemy. He decided that it would be best to comply for the moment and followed her farther into the port as they pushed their way through a crowd of nosy onlookers.

In addition to the large number of people already out and about in the harbor on various errands, a crowd that had noticed Sharon and the other tax collectors had gathered around them. Col occasionally heard jeers, likely because tax collectors frustrated trade, as he had seen happen with Yosef, and many saw them as workers of the devil who brought nothing but trouble into their peaceful lives. In turn, the tax collectors leading the way through the crowd were incredibly belligerent.

On the other hand, there were more than a handful cheering for them to scrutinize the corruption in the Church, to take back from the rich, and the loud hecklers from opposing sides were getting into fights among themselves here and there.

It did not seem as though the inhabitants of the city were all on the same page.

As their party pushed their way through the noise and clamor, a large building facing the street finally came into view.

The flag of the Kingdom, as well as a flag adorned with the city emblem, flew above it, meaning that was probably the tax collector association hall.

The tax collectors briskly strode toward the building, and right as they were about to cross the street before entering the final stretch—

“Wait there, waaait!”

An indignant voice overwhelmed the rest of the harbor’s hustle and bustle. Col visibly saw the tax collectors around him sucking their teeth and frowning. Yet, the response from the noisy crowd was different. Some whistled, some stamped their feet, and some even yelled, “Here he comes!”

Col had seen this sort of atmosphere in town before. It was just like a fighting match between chickens or dogs that townsfolk would sometimes hold on street corners.

“Don’t stop. Keep walking.”

The other tax collectors tried to pick up the pace when Sharon spoke, but the crowd blocked their way, clustering around in even greater density to close off the street.

Then the crowd to their right parted.

What appeared was another armed group, but these newcomers possessed equipment of an obviously different quality compared to what the tax collectors wore. They were not dressed as people who safeguarded the peace in the city but as those who risked their lives on the battlefield.

This was a band of mercenaries.

“What don’tcha understand about the word *wait*?!”

The tax collectors halted at the yell, which seemed loud enough to ruffle the hem of a bystander’s clothes.

In addition, members of the crowd who were probably hostile to the tax collectors—a group of people who were never popular with townsfolk to begin with—clogged the path to prevent them from reaching their destination.

“Looks like your tax collector association ain’t satisfied with just taking money from people’s pockets! Now you’ve started dabbling in kidnapping, too!”

The man who yelled was a short, portly fellow with close-cropped hair and a mustache.

That said, he was small only in stature; his shoulders and arms and legs looked like they were about to burst with toned muscle.

The battle-ax in his hand reminded Col of the mountain-dwelling earth spirits he’d heard of in legend.

It was Sharon—whose physique was the exact opposite of the mercenary’s—who stepped forward to deal with him.

“We merely came to the conclusion that we must carry out an inquiry.”

She confronted the round mercenary, looking down at him without flinching.

“Sounds exactly like something a kidnapper would say.”

“I see. You do seem like the type who’d be knowledgeable about that sort of trade.”

“Feh!”

The mercenary spat on the ground, then whirled around.

“What a nasty bunch you all are. One of our men watched you waltz onto some guy’s trade ship and walk off with one of our guests.”

“Guests? Guests, hmm?” Sharon said, disgusted, as though her suspicions were confirmed.

The round mercenary scrunched up his face in annoyance and rebounded with, “What I mean is all those aboard trading ships are our guests, guests of the traders’ association. Dealing with them falls into our territory. We can’t keep order in this city if you tax collectors just walk off with ’em!”

This mercenary is a part of the traders’ association?

It was not as though Col was especially knowledgeable about worldly affairs, but no matter what angle he examined this man from, it was impossible to believe he was a merchant. Larger companies might hire guards to protect

themselves against theft and such, but the group confronting them now easily numbered ten or fifteen people. They were more like a small squadron of troops.

Putting what he saw with the tidbits Sharon had mentioned earlier, Col concluded these people were affiliated with the Church.

They were a fully armed mercenary troop calling themselves the traders' association.

Col had already met a considerable number of players acting on the city stage; it seemed like things were going to get very complicated.

"What we do is under the king's orders."

"You might be in the Kingdom now, but it's not like we folks in the traders' association only recognize the Kingdom's authority. Or what? You tellin' me you wanna be responsible for making enemies out of every merchant across the sea?"

"..."

This was the first time Sharon faltered.

At that moment, a commotion erupted on the other side of the street as supporters of the tax collectors leaped out from the nearby association hall with a roar. Since the crowd wasn't entirely composed of people who sided with the traders, fights broke out all over like wildfire. At this point, the uproar had grown large enough that it was possible the city council might dispatch the city guard.

The mercenary grimaced, and Sharon saw this as her opportunity to speak.

"I won't let you do as you please."

The mercenary clenched his teeth so hard, a blue vein bulged from his temple, and just when it seemed the situation would explode—

"Excuse me, do you mind?"

An out-of-place voice interrupted them.

"What! You need a—"

Just as one of the other mercenaries was about to yell, he swallowed his words.

Finally, the two group leaders who had been staring each other down in the street looked in the direction of the voice before making sounds of surprise.

“This is a royal charter granting the right of arbitration. In the name of the king, I hereby exercise the right to adjudicate this dispute. On the authority of my master, Lord Hyland, I shall oversee the proceedings.”

The speaker was a truly tiny old man, but the make of his clothes was a cut above. They were tailored well but instead of being ornate, they were designed to clearly communicate the wearer’s position. His white mustache was also clearly different from what the crude mercenaries sported: firmly and neatly curved, perhaps set in place with egg whites.

He held up a piece of parchment in his hand, which had the stamp of the royal seal next to a flowing signature.

It was the seal of the Kingdom; nothing in this country held greater authority.

Both groups regarded the old man with a frown, but the first ones to reluctantly kneel were Sharon and the tax collectors.

“As you please.”

“Indeed.”

The old man nodded and turned toward the mercenaries.

“And yourselves?”

“Ugh.”

The mercenary groaned and glanced over his shoulder. There was a group of middle-aged men, well-groomed but with alert gazes, perhaps personnel from the traders’ association, who had blended in with the unruly crowd. They faced one another, discussed among themselves for a few moments, then gave their assent with a distasteful nod.

“Fine. We respect the king.”

“A wise decision. Of course, I am a neutral observer. I find no fault with either

of your parties. However, this man here is a special guest of my master's."

Sharon stayed kneeling and did not lift her gaze, but the questioning looks of the mercenaries quickly focused on Col. As he thought about how he should respond, the old man strode over as he placed the permit carrying Hyland's name into his pocket, his expression still composed.

"I have come to collect you on the orders of my master. My name is Hans."

"Oh, um...okay."

Still bewildered, Col ended up giving an airheaded response.

"Let us be on our way."

Then Hans walked off as if it was no big deal.

Still worried about Sharon, Col turned back to look at her, but her gaze was still cast downward. That meant their talk would have to come later.

Due to seeing the royal charter, the crowd feared the consequences of getting involved any further and voluntarily made way for Hans.

Beyond the sea of bodies, there were several people clad in armor who were easily recognizable as knights at a glance, as well as two noble-looking men on horseback.

They stood in a manner that was clearly to protect what lay behind them. Riding on a horse with a finer coat than the others was a clearly unhappy Myuri and a very relieved Hyland.

When travelers visited large cities, most of the time their lodgings ended up falling into one of three categories.

There were inns that anyone could stay at by paying a fee.

Then came association and trade houses, where only those with privileged connections could stay.

Lastly were the manors within the city walls that only those of special standing could rent.

"...So many of these houses are bigger than our bathhouse..." muttered Myuri resentfully as they rode in the carriage Hyland had prepared for them.

After the commotion in the square, Hyland had taken them to a district that was filled with rows of large mansions. The road was paved with neat flagstones, and even the stray dogs that wandered about seemed to have a finer pedigree than normal. Col spotted them sleeping daintily at the gates of most of the mansions, so he first thought they were being kept for hunting, but he occasionally saw people working at the manors fawning over and petting them, so it was more likely the creatures simply lived there.

They could also serve as guard dogs, so this was a beneficial relationship for both the manor residents and for the dogs.

Every time the carriage passed by these seemingly high-class strays, Myuri regarded them with hostility due to her wolf blood. All the manors were additionally made with a central courtyard, and apparently, it was in fashion to have a little fruit garden there. Going by the front of a house granted them a peek of sunbathed green, a slice of paradise in the center of a city brimming with noise and chaos.

Hyland's temporary residence was one of these manors as well.

"It's a relative's house, so this is the only place I could borrow. If my attendants weren't here, I might have rented an inn, but I can't act as freely as I'd like here in the Kingdom."

Hyland's voice sounded tired as she alighted from the carriage, and Hans, who had appeared earlier with parchment in hand to save Col, stared hard at her. Perhaps he was the sort of steward who fought to preserve the authority of his master, who tended to prioritize substance over titles and reputation.

"Well, let's keep talking inside. I've got sweets for you, little miss."

"What, really?!"

Myuri, who had been in a glaring contest with the dog in front of the manor that Hyland was borrowing, immediately lit up and turned with intense interest.

She was always shockingly disrespectful toward Hyland, but she was easily won over by food. While Hyland enjoyed how straightforward the girl was, it was beyond embarrassing for her big brother.

They passed through the colonnade at the front of the manor, then made

their way through the building, which did not have any corridors. Instead, the rooms were directly connected to each other.

“This room is always bright and warm.”

Hyland brought them to a south-facing room that looked out over the courtyard.

“First, let us thank God for our long-overdue reunion.”

When they sat in chairs with high backs at a long and narrow dining table, the house attendants poured wine into their silver goblets.

Myuri alone was served the product of the grapes before it became wine: grape juice. She was not entirely satisfied with it, but she raised her glass for the toast anyway.

“Your work in Caeson and Desarev was spectacular. You truly are the Twilight Cardinal.”

Col had never written that nickname of his in any of his letters to Hyland. It sounded like the title was spreading through avenues he himself was not aware of.

“Please stop...I am not worthy of such a grand title.”

“Ha-ha. I’m glad to see that you are the same as always. By the way...” Hyland changed positions in her seat. “...I sent a letter detailing the situation here in Rausbourne to Desarev, but I received your letter saying you were on your way here not long after. Though I stationed people at the harbor to wait for your arrival, there were so many ships that the tax collector association beat us to it. I’m sorry.”

Because she was a member of royalty, Hyland did not bow, but she still apologized by casting her eyes downward. Hans, who was standing by in a corner of the room, seemed rather angry, and Col panicked a little.

“Oh, it was not a problem. Nothing happened in the end anyway. It’s all thanks to your help, Heir Hyland.”

“My help...? Ha, my lineage’s help perhaps.”

Hyland rarely ever flaunted her noble bloodline, but normally she wasn’t that

self-deprecating, either.

As Col sat perplexed, wondering what could've brought this on, Hyland continued.

"After hearing about your work, I thought that I, too, should rouse myself to action. Shameful as it is, I have barely managed to produce any results in this city. The most my name can do is rout a rowdy crowd—"

"Young lady!" A scolding voice interrupted them. "How dare you say such a thing before commoners. You will ruin your family name!"

Hyland turned to Hans, her gaze weary but filled with love and respect.

"Gramps, I thought I asked you to stop calling me 'young lady.'"

"But—"

"Oh right. Do you think you could go explain to the city council why we exercised the right of arbitration in town? They must've received a report and are probably making grumpy faces in our direction right about now. We must take care to preserve our ties with them. Quickly now."

"...Very well."

Hans deliberately breathed a caustic sigh, bowed his head, then exited the room.

The moment the door shut, Hyland smiled weakly.

"He is a very stronghearted man who works hard to preserve my family's good name, but no matter how much time passes, he always thinks of me as a little girl. I don't know what to do."

"I know how you feel."

Myuri loudly sympathized with her and turned to give Col a reproachful look.

Hyland's smile brightened as she raised her goblet to Myuri.

"Well, either way, I was in high spirits when I first waded into this city, but I've been unable to accomplish anything; I was on the verge of declaring it all hopeless right before you arrived. The situation has been evolving too quickly for me over this past week in particular. It feels like I've been waiting an

eternity for you.”

“I see...But I must admit I am at a bit of a loss. What was that whole scene at the port about?”

Col had done a measure of traveling in his life and he knew quarrels of that sort could be found in every town anywhere in the world.

The antagonism between the bakers’ and butchers’ guilds was a tale as old as time; it had even become a typical setting for poets to write about. The tavern and inn associations also often had overlapping functions that soured their relationship, and fights between the sword smithies and knife crafters over what fell in whose jurisdiction would probably never be settled.

In that sense, conflict between tax collectors and merchants was not that unusual.

The abnormality started with the fact that both parties armed themselves and confronted each other in the harbor.

Moreover, one side was charged with the task of collecting taxes, a business that had support from some of the highest powers within the Kingdom. Openly challenging them to a fight—regardless of what the reasons may have been—could be interpreted as a challenge to royal authority.

Such a daring deed required backing.

“Those mercenaries said they were hired by the traders’ association, and the traders’ association is siding with the Church. And it seemed like the tax collectors were after me from the very beginning...”

“Yes, exactly—that problem has been giving me a huge headache the whole time. The traders’ association officially volunteered themselves as friends of the Church and stand opposed to the tax collectors. The reason the tax collectors went for you was likely because you look like a priest. They must have thought you had come to support the city’s cathedral or were an envoy of some sort.”

Ilenia had mentioned that the farther south one went, the stronger the Church’s influence.

Things here couldn’t be compared to Desarev’s cathedral, which felt isolated

and unaided.

“That’s why they both were trying to keep me away from the other group... Also, this is something that’s been on my mind, but...the merchants should need the approval of local authorities in order to conduct trade. Is it okay for them to simply ally themselves with the Church and oppose the tax collectors so openly?”

During the journey he once took with Lawrence in his merchant days, Col had seen trade and markets moved by the whim of the local authorities many times. Perhaps there was no need for Hyland to overthink the situation; why not just brandish royal authority and go over their heads? Merchants who couldn’t trade were like fish out of water.

As those thoughts ran through Col’s mind, Hyland’s expression twisted in annoyance.

“You are exactly right, but while the traders’ association might call themselves as such, the core of their group is not made up of inhabitants of Rausbourne. Theirs is a collection of companies whose headquarters are overseas, often farther to the south. And the south is firmly under the Church’s influence, you see. So yes, while they cannot risk displeasing our king, they must also stay on friendly terms with the Church; otherwise they will lose their standing at home. On top of that, the Church wants to shoulder in here to launch an aggressive counterattack. In that sense, the traders are acting aggressively thanks to the Church’s backing.”

“The Church’s backing? But the Church has avoided making any overt moves up until now. Have they gained important new allies on the mainland who are allowing them to be this forward?”

There was a certain number of those who did not want the Church to reform, such as conservative authorities and nobles with monasteries and churches in their territories that housed immense amounts of wealth, and it would not be surprising to hear that those various individual forces had colluded to join the Church’s side by forming a union to oppose the Kingdom.

Col steeled himself for the countless terrible scenarios he could imagine, but for some reason, Hyland offered only a troubled smile.

“Must I spell out the reason? I mean—don’t tell me you really still haven’t noticed yet.”

He stared blankly at the woman, who sipped her wine and looked at him apologetically.

“You’re the reason.”

“Huh?”

“The Twilight Cardinal.” Hyland murmured his alias and sighed deeply. “I should be proud that my eyes were keen enough to pick out talent as fine as you, but I’m rather uneasy, as things have turned out in ways far beyond anything I imagined. You sit across from me now, yet you hold more influence than an illegitimate royal could ever hope to wield.”

It did not seem like she was joking.

“Could I...ask you to elaborate?”

Hyland’s vague smile made it seem like she was apologizing for getting him wrapped up in such serious matters.

That was why his heart beat as intensely as it did.

How did the world see him? How were stories about him spreading?

“Everything started there, in Atiph. Thanks to you and your God-given wolf, I managed to light the signal of revolution. It was then that many of the Church officials learned how deeply the people’s anger ran, driving them into a panic.”

Hyland grinned when she said “*God-given wolf*.” Myuri, of course, pretended not to know what she was talking about, and it was unclear as to how certain Hyland was about who Myuri truly was, but it did not seem like she was ready to ruin the relationship.

Hyland sipped her wine and continued.

“And then the two of you pulled Caeson, core of the northern islands, completely onto the side of the Kingdom. The Kingdom’s position has gotten even stronger with them as our ally because of their control of large fishing grounds for herring and cod. After all, any who dare to challenge the Kingdom now will automatically end up in conflict with the pirates of Caeson. And then

ample shipments of fish would no longer grace their market stalls. Cheap fish is one of the keys to staying in the good graces of the common people, you know. People who can no longer buy fish will direct their anger toward the Church and their local authorities for endangering their livelihoods in order to support their indulgences.”

There were, of course, fish in the southern seas, but their numbers were no match for the herring and cod fisheries of the north. That influence was powerful.

“Also, what you did in Desarev,” Hyland said and sighed again. It was a sigh of admiration, as though she was surrendering to something. “The Kingdom and the Church have stood in stalemate for years, and you suddenly drove a huge wedge between them. It’s like scales that had been maintaining some semblance of a hazy balance, but then one side suddenly starts plummeting down. The Desarev cathedral, which had kept its doors firmly shut, made amends with a Kingdom city practically overnight due to the actions of one person, finally opening its doors again. Can you even begin to imagine what sort of shock that caused when news of it hurtled across the land?”

When she explained it like that, Col was shocked into silence.

As someone who had been at the center of those events, he knew that the reality had been far more complicated and much messier; there was a good reason and a sense of inevitability that led to the reconciliation between the cathedral and the town. It was absolutely not something that came about because of his actions alone.

But he also realized that was not how it would be perceived.

There was only so much space in a letter, and people had no choice but to describe the most intricate of storms in a general, easy-to-understand way.

People had to find ways to encapsulate and explain the most complicated of affairs with a limited number of words.

His being called the Twilight Cardinal was just one example.

And it was with the birth of these easily understood symbols that the tide of society changed.

Col, despite how dull he was, finally managed to swallow the situation.

“With those three incidents side by side, most people have simply guessed what happened, haven’t they?”

Hyland nodded.

“Yes. People are buzzing—now that the Twilight Cardinal has appeared, it won’t be long before a fourth revolution occurs, and then a fifth, before a final, surging avalanche will come roaring down and bring the whole state of affairs to a decisive end. That’s why I believe the Church has finally made up their mind. They must think that waiting for the troubled people of the Kingdom to admit defeat while they continue to withhold religious services like weddings, baptisms, and funerals is a stupid plan now that our side obviously holds the advantage.”

The proverb *one ant hole* came to mind. It referred to how the destruction of even the greatest of flood levees began with the tiniest of leaks no larger than one ant hole. Similar lessons were taught in the scripture as well.

Perhaps Col was close to powerless.

Yet, it seemed that even without much power, he had managed to open a hole wide enough for a tiny leak.

And before he realized it, events had become a mess far beyond his control.

“Now that the Church wants to take a more aggressive approach, they’ve begun holding talks with the merchants in the south.”

Col returned from his introspective thoughts when Hyland spoke again.

“Right now, since the right of taxation against the Church is being handed out left and right within the Kingdom, the power of tax collectors is growing. To long-distance traders and merchants, tax collectors and tax officials are essentially their mortal enemies. They’ve become increasingly worried that if they simply stay on the sidelines, they might get the short end of the stick when this is all over. The Church has always been influential as a major patron of business and trade, so when they approached the merchants, I’m sure there were plenty of reasons to take their side.”

Col started to piece the situation together in his head and recalled the recent events at the port like a fog had lifted.

He realized there was still one question lingering in his mind.

“I understand how things have reached this point. It was all caused by my—no...” He looked to Myuri, sitting beside him, and corrected himself. “...Our journey. I see that now.”

Myuri’s eyes widened, and as she happily rubbed her face against his shoulder, he continued.

“But I still do not understand why the people from the traders’ association were willing to oppose royal authority with weapons in their hands. I doubt they would be able to continue trading within the Kingdom after that.”

He could even go as far as to phrase it as picking up change in the path of an oncoming carriage.

Even if a passerby managed to collect a whole pouch full of copper coins, being struck by the carriage would far outweigh any potential gain. From Col’s perspective, the merchants were trying to do something exactly like that.

If they challenged royal authority, then they would surely be banned from conducting trade within the country.

There was no point in cooperating with the Church to chase away tax collectors if they lost the right to trade altogether. What did taxes matter if they could not earn any money at all?

Yet, there was a helplessness in Hyland’s expression.

“I suppose you could say we underestimated how cunning and shameless the merchants could be.” Her loud sigh echoed throughout the room. “In response to the threat of losing the right to trade here, the merchants became hostile and shot back with, ‘Would you be able to survive even a single winter if we withdrew all our ships from the Kingdom?’”

Col gulped. That was why Sharon had faltered when the mercenary threatened her.

“Our Kingdom is an island, and the era in which we could till the land to

sustain ourselves on our own is long past. Without foreign trade ships, it's uncertain if we could even put bread on our tables. If trade was to stagnate, then everything would immediately grind to a halt. We tasted that pain over a decade ago."

Col knew that story. He had come to the Kingdom before with Lawrence on his merchant journey. Back then, the wool trade had halted due to misgovernment, and he saw firsthand how great a depression the country fell into.

Even the monasteries, which once wielded great power within the Kingdom, fell onto hard times in those days because economic activity had shrunk so much.

If that was the result of a mere halt in the wool trade, what would happen if the steady flow of all daily necessities came to a standstill?

Without a doubt, that would result in a great chaos that Col didn't want to even begin imagining.

"Of course, we knew plenty well the merchants would threaten us like that. They created their association in what is, to them, foreign land just to have this sort of united bargaining power in the first place."

It was a hard-and-fast rule that people would gather and associate with those who shared similar interests in lands far from home, where they had nothing else to rely on.

"I understand...But judging from the way you're speaking about it, I imagine you anticipated their threats and thought of a way to challenge them already, yes?"

"That's right. There are plenty of ways we can frustrate their trade. But there is just one situation in which getting in their way won't show any results. And that is how perfectly united they are."

Hyland held her breath for a moment and quickly whirled to look around the room.

Col realized she was checking to see if Hans had come back when she leaned over the table, much like Myuri would.

“I just don’t get it. How have those greedy merchants conspired so perfectly?”

Her anguished expression was the result of having thought so long and hard about it.

“Conspired?”

“Yes. There is no point in using our authority to interrupt the businesses of merchants. But on the other hand, if the merchants were to all stop on their own, that would leave the Kingdom in dire straits. That’s why as long as they stand together in unity, we are instantly at a disadvantage.”

Those weak when scattered and alone grew stronger when they gathered and cooperated. That was exactly the sort of situation in which an association could prove its worth, and utilitarian merchants would immediately band together in solidarity for profit.

In that case, it was perhaps an underestimation on Hyland’s part that the merchants should fall in line after being threatened by the power of royal authority.

As Col mulled that over, wondering whether he should mention that, Hyland spoke.

“I still can’t believe it. Why don’t they quarrel with one another? Those merchants are creatures of self-interest. Aren’t they supposed to be willing to do anything to maximize their profits?”

When she said that, Col’s thoughts began to race. Maximize profits? Was that not exactly why these merchants cooperated like they were doing now, to challenge the authorities who were trying to get in the way of their trade?

His bewilderment must have been evident on his face.

Hyland looked at him and immediately shook her head, furrowing her brow resentfully.

“They might be united because they’re all merchants from the south, but that does not mean they’re all on good terms. They shouldn’t be so willing to pass up a chance to kick down their competitors. That is exactly why I thought the more we complicated the situation, the bigger an invitation we would create for

them to betray one another and the less likely they would continue to stand together in solidarity.”

Betray? Col tilted his head, and he suddenly heard a bright voice that sounded out of place. “Aha!” came a small laugh from Myuri beside him. “I always got sooo annoyed when that happened in play fights, too. But getting a head start on your opponent is definitely the most exciting thing to do.”

Myuri’s eyes lit up, and she was completely ignoring her grape juice and sweets.

Hyland was hardly offended by Myuri’s lack of manners but instead took her hand, as though backing up what she said.

“Yes, that’s exactly right! The first one to get ahead gains the biggest profits.”

As Col found himself at a loss, Myuri grinned mischievously.

“Brother only ever sees the good in people, so he doesn’t get it.”

He raised his head, wanting to say something back, but she was right in that he could hardly imagine what she meant.

“Col. Think with me for a moment. We’re in a situation where competitors in trade, fighting desperately over shelf space in the markets, have said of their own accord that they are willing to pull out from markets in the Kingdom. What do you think would happen, then, if some of them wanted to get ahead? There’s no way they haven’t imagined the profits of secretly agreeing to work with the Kingdom after that!”

It was entirely possible.

Merchants were truly utilitarian, and that was certainly one way to maximize their profits.

“And those merchants are all annoyingly clever rascals. All of them suddenly came up with the same thing at the same time. There’s no way we could take command over them. There would be a sudden battle of treachery, and their union would fall apart little by little. No way that wouldn’t happen.”

“But that didn’t happen, you mean?”

Hyland nodded when Myuri asked. She gravely lowered her head.

“Does that mean the Church is offering huge collateral to prevent them from trying to get ahead?”

Faith and loyalty were unreliable to merchants.

“Or maybe some sort of disciplinary action was taken against them in their country...But I can’t imagine a punishment big enough to put them all on the same page. Then, even supposing they proposed a profit for them, it still doesn’t make sense. How absurdly expensive of a medal did they have to prepare for this?”

The Church had earned the hatred of the people because of the astronomical amount of wealth they had accumulated.

But still, there was a limit to all things.

Could the Church promise enough riches, or threaten a punishment big enough to control all the foreign merchants, for them to not mind giving up all the trade with the Kingdom? To control all the transactions for the massive amount of boats in the harbor they saw from Yosef’s ship?

Such a thing seemed impossible, even for God.

“On the other hand, it would be a serious emergency if every foreign merchant truly left the country. All the wheat and meat would be immediately bought up from the markets, various products would jump up in price, and there would be looting everywhere. The Kingdom would descend into chaos. If that happened, then the Church would surely launch an attack.”

Impossible. The word stuck in Col’s throat like a lump of stone.

Hyland had carefully considered war with the Church and sent them to the northern islands for that very reason. That area was this region’s food store; the firepower of the fishermen-pirates would be crucial if war was to break out in the strait between the island and the mainland. However, fish were fish—they were not a replacement for wheat and oil and all the other daily necessities of life.

If all the merchants were to leave, then it would be the same as cutting off the Kingdom’s food supply.

If the Church was to recover from this setback, then this was their golden opportunity.

“And that’s not all,” Hyland said, her hand pressed to her forehead as though bearing a headache. “If the cost of things skyrocketed, riots occurred, and the Church took the opportunity to start a war and throw worldly affairs into chaos, then it’s also possible that Heir Klevend would play on the confusion to cause a civil war over the order of succession. That is truly what we’re most afraid of. We have the option of arbitration in the case of war with the Church, but internal conflict will only be resolved at the gallows.”

Chaos was always a ripe opportunity for those in low standing to claw their way up.

Hyland and company not only had to be wary of the Church on the outside but also of revolt on the inside.

They were truly beset with troubles both at home and abroad.

“That is why I wonder if the tax collector organization’s offensive posture toward the Church might be Heir Klevend’s orders as well. Perhaps he is deliberately trying to rile up the Church to create a reason for them to start a war.”

There were plenty of people who believed that belligerent lords who thought of talking as a waste of time had it all and that their valor was exactly what gave nobles honor.

“I may be doubting him too much, but...the tax collectors here in this city are unusual. These supposed drifters have come together to pledge loyalty beneath a banner, like mercenaries. You saw it, right?”

Col recalled what he had seen in the harbor. Even Yosef, who was used to seeing tax collectors on the seas, had been surprised at how coherent they were.

“But the more I think about it, the more I feel this is an opportunity for Heir Klevend to kill countless birds with one stone. Even if he managed to raise enough money by selling collection permits to cause internal strife and ultimately caused a war by backing the Church into a corner, just stirring up

confusion within the country could still create the groundwork for his civil war. Of course, if the Church just ran off with their tail between their legs, then he could assert himself as a key figure in the conflict between the Church and us. He's more of a tactician than I thought."

He was watching closely for a chance to take the throne and making elegant waves to do so.

"Of course, the king and I don't plan on bending to the Church. But we also must be concerned with peace within the Kingdom."

At this rate, the foreign merchants would all pull out from the Kingdom and political instability would stem from a serious supply shortage. The only one who would aim for the Kingdom as it reeled like that would be the Church.

There were countless countries throughout history that fell to ruin in wars over the throne.

The kinder Hyland was as a ruler, the more unbearable her country's ruin would be.

And Col himself could not idly stand by as others suffered.

He could not, but the situation before him was much too complicated and chaotic.

"I could say it's all nothing but guesses, of course, but...the drive of the tax collectors and the way the traders were acting just make me imagine terrible things..."

Hyland sank into her chair, exhausted.

As a member of the royal family, she had a responsibility to the fates of her countrymen.

The kinder she was, the more heavily that duty hung over her.

"Or maybe it's his way of testing their courage, gambling on everyone's expectations," Myuri said, taking a piece of sugared fruit from the copper platter. "It's totally possible, but I'm bad at gambling."

Myuri had seen plenty of nobles in Nyohhira, but Col did not know anyone else as grounded as Hyland.

And whatever the truth may be, the reality was that the Church had planned something, made the merchants their allies, and those merchants had come together to stand up against the Kingdom.

While he did not know what the trick might be, there was one thing he was certain of.

“If we consider everything individually, then it seems like a situation so far beyond little people like us. However...”

Both Hyland and Myuri looked at him.

“However, I believe our biggest job is to avoid a war.”

Hyland nodded gravely.

“Also, we cannot allow them to dishearten us in our chance for reformation. We have come all this way. If we do end up losing our spirit, then our next chance to right the wrongs of the Church would be decades away.”

There had been plenty of times when he almost gave in to the trouble before him, fell to his knees, tucked in his tail, and ran away.

Yet, he believed this was the right path and had walked all this way.

“It is exactly as you say, but do you have any leads at all? Obviously, if we can effectively use your name of the Twilight Cardinal, then the people might come together to resist like they did in Atiph...”

The reason Hyland was not as articulate as she had been before was because the situation was so vastly different from how it had been in Atiph.

This was not a situation in which she could easily disperse her enemies. If they cornered the merchants, the allies of the Church, then they would just run away, and that would only spell trouble for the Kingdom. And so the merchants needed to stay in the city, yet if they gave in to the pressure and compromised with the Church, then reform would only get further and further away.

And what was even more trouble was keeping an eye on the movements of the tax collectors, who were supposedly the Kingdom’s allies. That was because they might be trying to corner the Church to deliberately start a war, according to Heir Klevend’s scheming.

It was almost like a theological question.

Three bulls are headbutting, pushing against one another. Removing one bull would leave the other two with leftover force and they'd end up attacking you.

They had to find a way to stop two of the bulls without putting all three of them in the ground.

"The first thing that comes to mind is separating the Church from the traders' association."

"Right. If we could only get a grasp on their interests, then we could drive a wedge between them..."

The conversation trailed off here because the ones talking were a noble and a priest-in-training. They did not know how merchants thought.

"Have you talked to anyone from the Debau Company?" Col asked.

The company that controlled the entirety of the northlands was on Hyland's side.

"I did, but they are practically outsiders this far south. They are not a member of the traders' association, and their interests stand opposed to those of the megacorporations in the south anyway. The people on the inside know nothing."

"I see..."

In that case, there was only so much Col could do.

Maybe it was time for him to send a letter to Lawrence, the sharp ex-merchant.

Just as that thought crossed his mind—

"Anyway, you know what to do now."

"Huh?"

Both he and Hyland voiced confusion at the same time.

With both sets of eyes on her, Myuri simply shrugged.

"First you need to get a read on what the enemy's up to, Brother. You might

come up with some bright idea if you just take a look around the city.”

It can't be that easy..., he thought at first, but then it struck him.

“Are you sure you don't just want to get into mischief?”

“Oh, come on!”

Myuri puffed up her cheeks, and Hyland's absentminded laugh joined them.

“Ha-ha-ha. But it's not necessarily the worst option we have.”

“Heir Hyland, please don't encourage her...”

“It's all right. The Church had the rug pulled out from under them because they did not understand what the people wanted in Atiph. A lord who knows nothing of their land should change their attitude, shouldn't they?”

She was right, but when he turned his attention back to Myuri and saw the mischievous look on her face, something didn't sit right with him. He could only imagine she said that because she had grown bored of the conversation and wanted to go out and about in town.

“And it's now an undeniable truth that you are an important player here. Once your face and name are widely known, you will then lose freedom in your movements, and the people may not tell you the truth anymore.”

There was a hint of sadness in the smile on Hyland's face. Being a powerful member of a royal family was not without its drawbacks.

And perhaps the name of the Twilight Cardinal held more authority than even Hyland did.

“And I also wouldn't mind if you remained in the manor with me, occupying yourselves by debating the ominous clouds surrounding the Kingdom, looking dark and serious and wearing big frowns.”

“Not a chance.”

When Myuri turned her down, Hyland shrugged comically.

“I just want to build a good relationship with you two.”

Col was not sure if Hyland really liked Myuri all that much, but he could easily imagine Myuri getting bored and falling into a bad mood.

And since it was true this was not a problem that could be solved simply by thinking, it seemed like their only choice was to get out on the ground to investigate just who was plotting what.

When he came to that conclusion, he reluctantly had to agree that what Myuri said was right.

“Sure. So then, tomorrow—”

“It’s barely noon!!”

When Col leaned back at Myuri’s threatening attitude, Hyland’s shoulders shook with laughter.

“Heh-heh-heh. Exactly. And if you don’t play your cards right, you’ll have an endless wave of lobbying envoys paying you a visit tomorrow.”

Myuri glared at him with an *I told you so* look, so without any other choice, he gave in.

“I might be at the bottom of the ladder of all the royals in the Kingdom, but I still want you to see the biggest city in our country. Now that you’re here, there’s a shop you absolutely must visit at least once.”

“A shop? What do they sell?” Myuri asked innocently, and Hyland responded as though telling her a secret password.

“They specialize in mutton, and it’s called the Golden Fern.”

Myuri’s eyes immediately began to sparkle.

“Brother!!”

As she gripped his shoulder to shake him, he wondered how people could believe that he was the Twilight Cardinal.

“Yes, yes, I know. I know.”

“Oh, but...”

Myuri suddenly stopped.

Col wondered what was on her mind when the silver wolf girl turned to Hyland.

“Hey, do you have any clothes?”

“Clothes?”

“Yeah. See, Brother wants to be a priest or whatever so he only has clothes that make him feel like one.”

Hyland was about to burst into laughter, but she managed to hold back.

He glared at Myuri, who had bad-mouthed him like a little kid running around with a stick pretending to be a soldier, but she just calmly smiled back at him.

“You are right. I doubt anything good would come from walking around looking like a priest,” Hyland said and stood from her chair. “I’ll put something together, so just wait there.”

“But, Heir Hyland—”

“Make it good!”

It was Myuri who Hyland looked to in response.

“I’m on it!”

The two were weirdly on the same page, and Col could do nothing but sigh.

The clothes that Hyland prepared for them suited them in a way.

“That looks really good on you, Brother.”

Myuri sounded like she was teasing, but her eyes glittered, so perhaps he really did look okay. He had mixed feelings—happy, and also like he had done something wrong, but he obediently accepted it for the time being.

“The red on the vest isn’t too bright but not too pale; it’s arranged really nicely. And this cape with the gold edging is such a dark brown, it’s almost black, but it looks good. And what’s this fur? It’s not rabbit, is it?”

“It’s the fur of a sea creature. It’s thin and repels water but is surprisingly warm. You don’t often find fur of this texture on land animals.”

“Yeah. It’s really smooth...It’s so weird how slimy it is, like someone put oil all over it! The embroidery on the sash is so nice, too. The pants come with a wrap, like the hunters in the snowy mountains have. The shoes even go up to his knees.”

“These shoes are a holdover from when people who engaged in war dressed like this. Aren’t they dashing?”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t look like he’s showing off his physical prowess; it makes him look intellectual, and I like that.”

“Wow, I’m glad you noticed. I suppose that’s because plenty of nobles come to visit Nyohhira. You have a good eye.”

After Col had put on his outfit, Myuri and Hyland engrossed themselves with talk of clothes at his expense.

“This hat is amazing!”

“Isn’t it?! This hat indicates a very high level of education and has an air of authority to it.”

It was a fur hat made of the same fur as the cape; it was flat, roundish, and without a brim. It was a masterpiece, whose brass decorations and gold hemming gave it elegance.

“I’ve never seen it in Nyohhira before, but I guess there are people who wear this stuff to work.”

“Yes. Nyohhira is neutral to many countries, after all, so I suppose you can’t hold any over-the-top ceremonies. I imagine you don’t often get to see many guards of honor.”

Col was essentially wearing the type of clothes a royal attendant would wear for a ceremony.

Myuri, on the other hand, had an eye-catching white cloak resting on her shoulders, held shut by a rough belt made of black leather. All the clasps were gold, so despite how simple the outfit was, she could easily be mistaken for someone of high standing.

Together, they looked like a noble daughter of a good family who had come from some faraway territory with her retainer.

“It’s almost vexing how good it looks on you,” Hyland said, and Myuri giggled.

“Don’t worry—you look important, too.”

“Myuri!”

Col cautioned her despite himself, but Hyland seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Ha-ha-ha! Either way, there are plenty of nobles and rich people pretending to be nobles here in the city, so you won’t stand out too much.”

“I’m sorry we’re using such nice clothes of yours...”

He felt apologetic for the trouble, and Hyland shrugged slightly.

“Why, I’d honestly be willing to offer you more. But you don’t accept any compensation I offer.”

She sounded slightly aggressive when she said that, likely because she truly felt that way. Royals had to provide rewards suitable for the jobs their attendants had accomplished. And so she had mentioned giving them a reward for all the work they had done so far.

He did not ask what that might entail specifically, but Hyland was a noble, and a royal noble at that, so he surmised that it was an unimaginable amount of money, so he firmly turned it down.

“Well, do enjoy yourself,” Hyland said, and Col respectfully bowed his head.

When he turned to face Myuri, he fully expected her to be buoyant with the thought of walking around the city and eating mutton, but her expression was hardened and her eyes downcast.

He felt irritated, wondering if she still did not like it when he bowed to Hyland, but she instead kept her head down and only lifted her gaze, giving Hyland wide puppydog eyes as she asked, “Aren’t you coming with us?”

She called Hyland “Blondie” and assumed a rude attitude toward her at every turn. There were even times she bore her fangs at her, so while Col’s reaction was a given, Hyland was the most surprised of either of them.

Myuri did not seem to like the idea that her big brother was serving Hyland, a woman, but they shared an interest in clothes, and her closed heart seemed to finally open up.

For a brief moment, Hyland looked as if she was going to cry. Col had heard once that nobility could be quite lonely.

But at the same time, she was one who had spent a long time hiding how she truly felt.

She immediately smiled and spoke.

“I’m very happy to hear that, but if I came along with you to eat, you would stand out. And when people start realizing that he’s the Twilight Cardinal, that would only bring in unwanted scrutiny. You two should enjoy your time together on your own.”

“...But you wore a villager disguise in Atiph.”

“That’s because I was in a foreign country. But here, I have no shortage of acquaintances. And the Golden Fern is a very popular place where a lot of those people get together.”

Hans would not allow her to disguise herself as a handmaiden. When Myuri made a disappointed face, Hyland knelt down before her and took her hand.

“It hurts me, too. You know, it is usually incredibly rude of me to turn down an invitation to a meal from such an esteemed lady.”

For a moment, Col thought Hyland was a man.

That sort of act suited her much too well.

“...If you act so princely like that, Brother might get the wrong idea and get jealous.”

“We can’t have that.”

The two were a perfect pair.

They both giggled, and Col could do nothing but look away with a wry expression.

“Please enjoy my country.”

“Yeah. Okay, let’s go, Brother.”

“U-uh—”

Myuri pulled him by the hand. Hyland mimed pushing him away, as though telling him to take the lead with her.

He felt strange, usually being the one minding others, and the moment they left the room, Myuri waved to Hyland, and Hyland gleefully waved back.

There was nothing greater than a friendship that transcended social standings.

“Now then, Brother,” Myuri said as they exited the manor. “I trust you’ll be keeping this cute little princess nice and safe?”

Minus the audacity to so blatantly flatter herself, she surely was as adorable as a young noble lady.

“Of course, of course,” he replied and grasped her hand again, and together they strolled down the flagstone street.

The moment they left the district of rows of elegant manors, the atmosphere around them immediately became noisy.

Back at Hyland’s manor, Col wondered slightly if they would stand out in a bad way wearing these clothes, but they did not at all. Rather, there were so many people and the place was so lively that no one had time to think about others.

And the little princess was overwhelmed by the city as a whole.

“Brother, what is up with this city...? No matter where we go, it just keeps on going...”

It sounded like she was telling him a riddle, but he understood what she wanted to say. The structure of a city this big would be completely different from a normal town.

Cities as big as Rausbourne did not have artisan districts or trade districts, as one often saw, but instead had countless smaller towns within it. These towns were often divided by parish, with churches and chapels serving as the nucleus and gathering places only for those who lived within those districts, as well as all the necessary shops such as bakers, butchers, taverns, and workshops for artisans who were specifically for that neighborhood. The parish on the other side of the street would be made up in the same way; there was no need for people of one parish to go out of their way to another.

The main avenues connected these countless parishes together, and that created another unique world of its own.

For example, rows of outdoor stalls and artisans set up shop specifically for visitors coming from out of town; no locals did their shopping there. The residents did not stop to watch the performers put on a show on the street corners, either because they were too busy with normal life or had seen it all already. But then, the local children ran by in droves, and the roaming chickens and pigs skulked around, waiting for a chance to get some of the waste that escaped from the stalls. And then, in the midst of all the congestion, a rich carriage drawn by four horses tried to push its way through as though it owned the place and got into a yelling match over who gives way to whom with laborers pulling carts filled to the brim with salted fish. A closer look showed a group of stray dogs that gathered near the back of the cart in order to have a lick at the salt that had spilled out.

It was chaos.

Col was worried that Myuri, who had been so enraptured by the sights of the city that she forgot to breathe, might get lost in the throng of people, so he pulled on the girl's hand and they took shelter on the side of the road.

And there just happened to be a small chapel.

"Hey, Brother? Is this a church?"

Myuri's hair and clothes were mussed and her cheeks were flushed, either because she was excited by the city or because she had been jostled around by the crowd, and she spoke like she had just woken up from a dream.

She did not move to fix her loosened robe, so Col dropped to his knees to readjust her leather belt, but she still stared intently at the run-down chapel.

"Yes, it must be the chapel for this district. Oh, stop, can you face forward, please?"

Not only would she not stay still, her waist was so thin, there was no place for the stiff leather belt to rest on. There was a stray sleeping at the front of the chapel; when she realized it was a dog, she started growling deep in her throat.

It was a big dog with long ears, but it seemed it could only shrink back when

glared at by a wolf, looking up at her with servile puppy dog eyes and a pitiful, high-pitched whine.

“Stop that. It’s just a poor dog.”

He struggled to finally close the leather belt, and after he stood up, he jabbed her in the head.

“Ow! Hey, why’d you hit me?”

Myuri also looked up to Col with wide puppy dog eyes, but she did not look to him in obedience but in protest.

“Because you are acting like you’re going to bite anyone and everyone,” he said with a sigh and adjusted her hood. “Calm down a little bit. You finally have an outfit you look cute in, and you’re putting it to waste.”

“What?”

Myuri straightened herself in surprise and immediately beamed with joy. Had her tail been out, it would have been wagging so vigorously, it would have surprised the stray dog even more.

“Really? Wait, are you being serious, Brother? I look cute? Say it again!”

“I will once you stop acting so mischievous and tomboyish.”

“Awww, I haven’t pulled any mischief and I’m not a tomboy...”

He wondered for a moment who she thought she was, but Myuri made a sound of realization and looked back at the long-eared dog. The dog she bullied immediately sat up and adjusted its posture, its front paws together, like a retainer being glared at by a king.

“Ilenia told us about this, didn’t she?”

He thought she might be quibbling or trying to trick him again, but he was surprised to hear a name he was not expecting.

“Miss Ilenia?”

“Yeah. She said that you don’t usually see a lot because they’d stand out in a small village, but bigger towns have a lot of roaming animals and that we should befriend them if we can.”

Myuri waved her hand as she spoke. The long-eared dog then stood up, came over to her, and she patted it on the head.

“She said when she’s doing trade alone in town, people end up going after her. Thieves have tried to break into her room at inns lots of times, but the chickens and pigs alerted her and helped her out and stuff.”

Now that he thought about it, Col remembered Ilenia even had stacks of inventory outside the room at the inn where she was staying.

Considering how every company hired bodyguards for that, it seemed careless, but she did have countermeasures in a way that only a nonhuman could.

“She said it’s better to have friends and that we should use our strengths when we can. That’s what she told me.”

The long-eared dog completely accepted Myuri as its master, its tail wagging as she patted its head, and it even hopped up onto its hind legs after being given some sort of command. The reason Col stood there, speechless, was not because he was impressed by how easily she handled the dog.

It was because he was intensely shaken that someone besides himself had given her such important advice.

Ever since they’d left on their journey, Myuri had demonstrated that she was not a girl who needed protecting, as she had saved Col countless times. Yet, she clung to him, calling out to him like always, and for this reason he believed that everything she was would always fit inside his arms.

In short, he should have known everything about her, and he should have been the one to show her the way.

Or perhaps that was possessiveness.

“Well, Mother can easily chat with the bears in the woods and they tell her where all the beehives are, but I can’t do that, so this is also practice for me... Wait, Brother? A-are you okay?”

Myuri looked back at him, her expression dubious.

He wanted to say, *It is nothing*, but they were right in front of a house of God.

He could not lie here.

“Yes...I was just thinking about how you’ve met such a good friend.”

Instead of lying, he hid all his feelings behind his words.

He should have been happy that Myuri would meet many people and grow and mature.

He would set aside the pain and sadness of letting go of a little sister he so doted on for when he reunited with Lawrence.

“Um, okay? I guess we’re friends. I wanted to talk more with her, though,” Myuri said as she regretfully tilted her head, and behind her, other strays besides the long-eared one gathered, sitting with their front paws neatly together like her henchmen.

When he saw that, he remembered when she was the leader of all the scoundrel children in Nyohhira, and a small smile appeared on his face.

“We’ll go to see her next time we have the chance.”

“Okay!”

And then he found himself relieved at how she happily clung to his arm as she always did. Yet, as they continued on their journey, she would learn plenty of things he could never know from plenty of people he could never even imagine. And whenever that happened, Myuri as she was now would slowly become a memory.

While he knew that was natural, he still wanted to hold on to this moment now as he cradled her. But then, it felt as though the patient dogs were giving him an odd look.

He thought they were looking at him as though to say, *What is a fool like you doing to our master?* But perhaps he was imagining it.

He looked at the chapel—to escape from the dogs’ gazes—and said to Myuri, “That aside, would you mind if we stopped in here briefly?”

Now that they had come all this way to a faraway city, he wanted to see what the local chapels were like.

“Huh? I don’t mind...Can we just go in? It doesn’t seem like there’s anyone around.”

Myuri could apparently tell what sort of position the chapel was in from her experiences traveling so far.

“The strays have likely taken their place here because people must feed them when they come and go. And it’s not like the doors have been nailed shut like they were in Desarev.”

Myuri peeked through the gap between the rather warped wooden doors, then looked back at Col.

“I guess we have to go in, if you want to so badly. But just for a sec, okay?”

It was always Myuri who wanted to take detours, so now that their positions were flipped, she seemed rather happy.

Col placed his hand on Myuri’s head with a compliant, wry smile, and she shrugged as though it tickled her.

While the dogs’ gazes still bothered him, he pretended not to notice in the end and opened the door, entering the chapel.

It was a small chapel, and the pews inside had enough room to seat about twenty. Since the only ones gathering here were likely those who lived in the parish, it was more than suitable.

The platform, which was more like the kind that an outdoor vendor would use to put clearance items up for sale in the market and less like an altar, and the long, backless pews made for a comfortable atmosphere. The high ceiling reached to about the third floor of a regular building, which gave the space an open, welcoming feeling when coupled with the many high windows for letting in light.

Of course, it wasn’t perfect—Col immediately found scars from the conflict between the Kingdom and Church. There was a mark on the wall from where the emblem of the Church once hung and had now been taken away. Much like Desarev, it was likely it had been a long time since a priest was last here.

However, the floors had been neatly swept, and the pews were nicely

polished. He could visibly see the faith of those who gathered here, and as he gazed happily at it, he approached the platform, and his eyes widened at what sat there.

“This...”

“Whoa, what’s with the book?”

Myuri loved reading, including adventure stories, so she reached out from beside him to flip through the pages.

And she realized what it was right away.

“Wait, this—”

“...is part of the common-language translation of the scripture.”

It was a selection of the most well-known parts often used in sermons, and there were even parts in there that he had translated. It was roughly bound together with a fraying twine, but the pages were dirtied with finger marks—he could tell that many people had read through it.

Even with the emblem of the Church gone, the people’s faith was still present here. This little book on its own was supporting the hearts of the people while the priest himself was gone.

And those were parts that Col had foregone sleep to translate.

Something he had done was nourishing the faith of these people.

While he felt a lump forming in his throat, Myuri spoke, still peering into the book.

“That’s a part you did.”

Col’s breath caught at her sudden comment.

When Myuri looked back, however, her expression was surprisingly puzzled.

“Wait, you know that the way you write is exactly the same way you talk, right? I could tell right away.”

“Is...is that so?”

Col responded, still reeling, and Myuri pouted a little.

“Why wouldn’t I be able to tell? I know you best out of anyone in the whole world!” proclaimed Myuri boldly. Col felt like he had been thinking the very same thing just a little while ago...but he dared not say that out loud.

There was an epigram that went, *Stare into the abyss, and the abyss stares back*, and that was exactly right.

“And when I think about how all these people are reading stuff you wrote, it makes me want to brag,” Myuri said with a tickled smile, her mood now totally refreshed. He saw her impish, pointed canine peeking out from beneath her lips, and as he thought about how innocent she looked, she suddenly grasped his hand gently.

She was ever changing, more prone to sudden shifts than the mountain weather, and without a hint of teasing she said, “I really think you should be more confident in yourself.”

He could not say the thought that she simply said that because she was his sister and she saw him in a favorable light by default did not cross his mind. Col could tell she was being earnest.

A sincere comment warranted a sincere response.

“...I should. Thank you.”

Myuri was supporting him, and so he needed to work even harder for her.

As he collected himself again, he looked to her, who had turned her gaze back toward the book, and figured this was a good opportunity.

“By the way, the part I translated—”

“Oh, I like *you*, Brother. I’m not really interested in what you write in the scripture.”

“...”

The hope that she would at least accept the parts of the scripture he had written in his own words was squashed in an instant.

Myuri hummed with satisfaction at cornering her brother, then turned around to poke him in the chest.

“That’s because you *are* a greater man than you think you are. That’s why I believe that while Blondie’s getting stomachaches over what’ll happen to her country, you’ll be out there as the great Twilight Cardinal pulling your awesome moves to solve it.”

Even though she was much more heroic than he was, she wanted her brother to act like that. Deep in his heart, he knew she was expecting way too much of him, but she was his little sister, and as her older brother, he had an obligation to step up to her expectations.

He patted her head as she clung to his arm and cackled, and he gave the best response he could.

“I cannot say it will be very awesome, but I hope to help in any way I can.”

He believed that even doing what he was doing now was much too audacious for someone who had been working as a helper in a remote mountain bathhouse just one month prior.

But Myuri was not satisfied.

“Come ooon, Brother, again? You turned down Blondie’s reward! I bet she was going to give us amazing treasure!”

“That is not the reason I am traveling. Receiving clothes, food, and shelter is enough for me. And please let go. You’re going to damage the book.”

She reluctantly let go and placed the book back onto the altar.

Inside were the blessed teachings of God and the seeds of his wishes to be of help to the world. Col would be lying if he said he felt no pride in seeing these buds starting to sprout.

It seemed the dreaming boy who shivered at the thought of having the power to change the world was still somewhere inside him.

“I am of little influence, so I do not know how much I can accomplish, but I do pray that I can settle the dispute between the Kingdom and the Church.”

That being said, he still could not frolic about before Myuri, so he had to be cautious with his pride.

Myuri seemed like she was going to say something else, but a sudden, third

voice echoing around them cut her short.

"I agree, but you must double-check what that solution might mean."

There were no other figures in the chapel, and there did not seem to be any places to hide. Yet, he still did not know where the voice was coming from as he looked left and right.

It was the wolf-blooded Myuri who noticed first.

"Brother, above us."

Col looked up, and there, sitting on the edge of the opened skylight, was a bird.

If Col thought himself a servant of God, this would be where he would think that he appeared through a messenger, but unfortunately, he knew of beings like this besides God.

"Are you...Miss Sharon?"

When he said the name of the tax collector they'd met at the harbor, the bird above them puffed her feathers out, spread her wings, and flew down.

But she did not land at their eye level. She stopped on top of a candleholder fixed to the wall at about where the second floor would be in a normal building and looked down at them.

"...I hate her," Myuri muttered with a growl, but she was being not entirely unreasonable.

Sharon was so clearly peering down at them from the candleholder, both figuratively and literally, that it bewildered him.

Ilenia was friendly, and Autumn was practically apathetic. He found himself upset to see a nonhuman this overtly hostile toward them.

"Let me ask you something," said Sharon, the majestic eagle. *"Are you dogs of the Church?"*

"Huhhh?"

Myuri's voice, every bit as angry as Sharon was hostile, echoed through the quiet chapel.

CHAPTER TWO



CHAPTER TWO

The eagle, ruler of all birds, looked down at them over her beak.

The one glaring at the eagle with a growl rumbling deep in her throat was a girl who had inherited the blood of the wolf, the king of the forest.

For Myuri, who could command the stray dogs of the city with a glance, to be called a dog was the greatest insult.

“Did you just call me a dog, you chicken?!”

Myuri yelled with her ears and tail exposed as Sharon literally looked down on her, puffing out her chest.

The hairs on Myuri’s tail instantly stood on end, but Col stepped between them.

“By *dogs of the Church*, might you mean the inquisition?”

Sharon puffed herself up and shook out her wings, as though sighing.

“How insolent.”

“Hey! Get down here! Chicken!”

As Col held Myuri, who was practically threatening to rip the other to shreds, back by her shoulders, he responded.

“If we really were with the inquisition, then how would you explain Myuri’s ears and tail?”

Those who were not human were deemed by the Church to be possessed by demons and had the fate of being burned at the stake if they were discovered.

The inquisitor’s job was to find those who followed pagan beliefs and the very pagan gods themselves.

“Simple. Taking that dog along with you would make sniffing out our kind an easy task, and it serves as a simple way to lower our guard as well. Two birds...

two dogs with one stone."

"Hey! You clearly called me a dog just n—Gwah!"

The fur on Myuri's tail was standing completely on end, and she was ready to run after Sharon to bite her, even if it meant climbing up the wall, but Col reached around to put his hand on her mouth. His gaze never left Sharon as he held the thrashing wolf pup still in his arms.

"Miss Sharon." He called her name and dropped his shoulders. "Could you please cut the act?"

"Gwah...gwah?!"

Myuri calmed in his arms, her ears twitching inquisitively.

"If you truly believed we were inquisitors, then I do not understand why you would appear in your true form to confirm such a thing."

"..."

Sharon remained silent, staring hard at them.

"Perhaps you really did believe we might be inquisitors, but I'm sure you have already ascertained what you wanted to."

Sharon and the other tax collectors were trying to take back the fortunes of the Church within the Kingdom. It would not be unusual if the Church tried to carry out some sort of sabotage. He could understand how cautious she needed to be, even after reading Ilenia's letters and hearing about the Twilight Cardinal.

But what he heard Sharon say and what he saw her do did not add up.

"You came to us in this form for another reason, did you not?"

"You're a clever one," she said and spread her wings, flapping them several times, carrying herself to a shelf in the corner of the chapel. She was matching her eye level to theirs in her own way. *"I first thought you had forced her into slavery to put her to work. A disciplined dog will do as it's told, no?"*

"Hey!!"

Myuri's tail puffed up at being called a dog again. Col had thought she was maturing, but she was still easily riled up by even the most obvious

provocations.

It was hard to tell exactly, as Sharon, a bird, was expressionless, but it almost seemed like she was having fun teasing Myuri.

“Miss Sharon.” He called her name with an admonishing tone, and Sharon flicked her tail feathers, as though shrugging.

“I received word from a fellow bird and observed you long before you arrived at port in this city...Honestly, I can barely stand watching you two interact,” she said, exasperated.

Much like the wolf’s sense of smell, human eyesight was no match for that of the bird, and when she mentioned it, he remembered how many seabirds had been above the boat when they arrived in Rausbourne.

On the one hand, Col suddenly felt rather embarrassed knowing that someone had seen his private moments with Myuri. Conversely, Myuri puffed out her chest in pride and took his arm, but Sharon uncomfortably turned away.

“Miss Sharon, please let me say this before there are any misunderstandings—Myuri is the daughter of the man who helped me through life and is like a little sister to me.”

“Brother’s just shy.”

While birds were not supposed to be that expressive, Sharon’s irritation appeared in the form of a half-open beak.

“I don’t think one should expect much of a relationship between human and nonhuman.”

“Hey!”

Sharon easily brushed off Myuri’s threatening attitude by simply looking away.

“Because that dog there looked thoroughly tamed to me. I didn’t think she could possibly be working for the Church, but I couldn’t shake the last of my suspicions.”

Myuri bared her fangs and growled at being called a dog again, and she gripped so hard on Col’s arm that it hurt.

“However...If she gets this angry at being called a dog, then at the very least, she hasn’t lost her pride as a nonhuman. She could not possibly serve as the leader of the Church’s hunt.”

Apparently, her provocations had also been a form of confirmation.

“I’m glad your questions have been cleared up. Let me just say this again: We are not friends of the Church. Of course, we are not entirely its enemies, either; what we are hoping for is a reformation, not to overthrow them.”

“Whether you are friend or foe is up to interpretation. It seems your faith is true, even if you’re going around with that dog.”

Myuri’s eyes sharpened again, so Col got a handle on her before answering.

“God created everything on this earth. And so we must love everything equally.”

“No, we shouldn’t!”

Myuri immediately interjected, and Sharon puffed herself up.

“Erm, Myuri...”

“You can’t love everything equally! I should be number one!”

She would not listen to him if he explained to her that it was a quote pulled straight from the scripture.

As he found himself at a loss as to what to do about Myuri as she howled, Sharon murmured softly, *“...So this is the Twilight Cardinal.”*

While she sounded annoyed, he could not possibly be angry about it.

“To be honest, that nickname is far beyond what I deserve.”

“But it is your name nonetheless. Whether you like it or not, that position already belongs to you.”

Hyland had told him the same thing. The friction between the Kingdom and the Church had been at a standstill for many years, but it was now making its way to the next stage with earth-rumbling steps.

And the one who caused that was none other than himself.

“...I suppose I have to accept it, don’t I?”

“You do. Any bridge with a weak keystone will collapse.”

She was right.

“Also—”

The eye of the eagle, the hunter of the sky, twinkled.

“If you do not securely establish your position, others can easily use you. You could become either my friend or my foe. That would be trouble.”

“You’re a foe! I won’t ever be your friend!” Myuri yelled and stuck out her tongue.

Sharon gave only a birdlike tilt of the head.

“It is true—I am in a rather awkward position. However, I have heard about the situation of the city...of the Kingdom. You could end up being either friend or foe as well, Miss Sharon.”

He paused and fixed his gaze deep on her expressionless face.

She was one of the three forces who would decide the fate of the city.

Sharon was the vice president of the tax collector association, who was acting under the Kingdom’s prerogative.

“Are you aware that your tax collecting carries the possibility of cutting the life from the Kingdom?”

That was essentially the main point of what Hyland had told him.

The Church knew they had the strength in numbers and were trying to light the flame for a counterattack. If he stayed on the sidelines, especially now, all the riches of the churches within the Kingdom would end up in the hands of the tax collectors.

The option of war was growing ever more likely, and it seemed Heir Klevend, who backed Sharon and the tax collectors, was rather hoping for that possibility. By using the collection rights to corner the Church and forcing the cornered Church to start a war, chaos would erupt within the Kingdom, which he would take advantage of to usurp the throne...

Just as it had been demonstrated in countless tales of conquer, chaos was the perfect chance for those lower in standing to distinguish themselves. Even a man who had held a simple job in a remote bathhouse could one day come to be called the Twilight Cardinal.

However, if war did break out and all the foreign merchants stopped their trade, an unprecedented tragedy would befall the people of the Winfiel Kingdom. Not to mention that the outbreak of civil war would be far too terrible a sight.

Was Sharon aware of what sort of web she had a hand in?

Or perhaps, as Hyland had said, she was fully aware of what she was doing.

“I pray for peace for the people, just as much as I pray to correct the evil practices of the Church.”

And he also wanted to help Hyland, whom he knew on a personal level. If Heir Klevend revolted and caused a civil war, then Hyland would have to fight her own people in order to protect her country.

Then, on the slim chance that she lost, history very clearly demonstrated what happened to fallen leaders.

“You said you wanted my cooperation and reputation, yet you ask my help only for collecting taxes, heedless of the state of the Kingdom?”

While he may be pitiful when it came to other things, he could take pride and confidence in his own convictions.

He spoke loud and clear to Sharon, who puffed herself up as though taking on the challenge, and said, “*You think it’s money we want?*”

Tax collectors cast successful bids on collection permits, collected through their own wits, and profited.

But the reason he froze when he heard her say that was because it occurred to him that perhaps Hyland’s conjecture was off its mark. In short, perhaps they were not the vanguard following Heir Klevend’s scheme, deliberately cornering the Church to cause a war.

In that case, that made it clear if he and Sharon were friend or foe.

“You think we would come together for money? We want something else.”

Sharon spread her wings wide and, like a stretching cat, flapped them several times in place.

And what she finally said after a moment of silence was nothing he could have ever predicted.

“We want revenge.”

“...Revenge?”

It was so unexpected, but when he remembered how she was not human, he could imagine all sorts of pasts she might have had.

But in that case, he still questioned it.

“If you hate the Church...then I can think of several reasons why. But then, does that mean all the tax collectors I saw in the harbor are also not human?”

If so, Myuri would have said something, so when Sharon heard him say that, she narrowed her eyes in vexation.

“If that was the case, then we would instead simply attack the Church, but you’re wrong. I’m the only nonhuman. We have all come together purely because we hate the Church equally. Human or no, the best reason to bring drifters like us together is a shared hatred.”

Sharon’s explanation only made the problem even bigger. Col could barely comprehend the hatred Sharon and the other tax collectors shared.

But he could tell right away how deep it was. He felt a stinging, burning rage from her words, yet her eyes remained calm.

Myuri changed the position of her feet to brace herself, perhaps prompted by Sharon’s overwhelming determination.

Sharon was not acting on impulse.

That was why it was not anger but hate.

“Of course I know about the war you fear. It seems like we might be the spark that would cause it, after all. But we have absolutely no intention whatsoever of loosening our grip on collecting taxes. We are doing this to take revenge on the

Church—not for money and hardly for some heir who’s backing us for some plot or another. It just so happens that we’ve chosen the rights for tax collection as our tool. We bid for these rights simply because we had no other options.”

Ilenia the sheep had also been using the tax collection permits as her tool.

“Do you know what the punishment is for failing to comply with the collection of taxes under royal authority?”

“...Death, isn’t it?”

Of course, it would be almost impossible to sentence the entire organization of the Church to death.

But there were people on the Kingdom’s side, so right now, all the good reasons to attack the Church were in order.

They had authority enough to wage war with the Church.

“But...whatever major reasons you may have, do you still plan on bringing misfortune to the Kingdom for your own personal revenge?”

One could not place others’ feelings on the scale to measure their importance. But whether he be a priest hopeful or not, he could not acknowledge revenge, not to mention the countless livelihoods that would be jeopardized by war.

And Sharon seemed well aware of that.

“I don’t want to argue with you. I just want you to know.”

“...Want me to know?”

“Yes.”

Sharon spread her wings; elegantly flew up into the air, over their heads; then landed on a pew near the chapel entrance. Her eyeline was just below theirs.

“At any rate, the Church is not worth defending. It sounds like you want to correct their evil practices, in which case, we have a suggestion for you: In order to right their wrongs, the only option is to drag them out onto the street corner, draw them up by their necks, and eviscerate them.”

Col would not be surprised if this was Sharon on her own, since she was

nonhuman, but she had said all those who gathered in the tax collection association shared a hatred for the Church. He was not sure why, but he believed they still had time if he listened to what she had to say. Sharon, at least, had said she wanted him to know.

If they could talk, then that would be the perfect option.

“Then, let me hear what you have to say. There is still the possibility I might stop you even after that, though.”

“If you’re gonna use my brother, then I’m gonna bite you to death.”

Sharon cast a brief glance at Myuri, then replied.

“I’m not going to force you. We have no intention of stopping either way.”

She sounded arrogant, but depending on how one perceived it, it could also be taken as her honesty.

Col decided he would not waste any more words, and he nodded.

Myuri growled, having been ignored, so Col casually stroked her head in order to calm her down.

“But what should we do?”

Anyone was free to enter the chapel. The morning service ended a while ago, and there was still plenty of time before evening services started, but anyone could appear at any time.

“There’s a place I want to show you. It will be easier to explain if we go there.”

“Well then—” he began, then paused. “I would rather you didn’t guide us while flying through the sky...”

The streets were crowded, and they would not be able to keep up if she led them in the sky. While Myuri was another story, Col was sure he would get lost.

“It’s fine. Luckily, you’re dressed as a guard of honor.”

“Huh?”

The moment Col wondered what she meant, Sharon again levitated lightly into the air, then landed on a place he least expected.

“Wh—! Hey! Get off from there, chicken!”

“M-Miss Sharon?!”

Sharon had landed on his shoulder.

“You are a guard of honor with an eagle on your shoulder. People will think of you as someone from a very good family. People will part the way for you.”

That might be true, but Sharon was looking at Myuri, who was growling and gnashing her teeth as she spoke. She was doubtlessly enjoying Myuri’s reaction.

It was too much mischief, and he was about to try to take her off his shoulder.

“Generally speaking, if I was to walk around in my human form, it would just be the cause of unnecessary trouble. Would you mind getting tangled up with those imbeciles from the traders’ association again? Think about why I didn’t go directly to Lord Hyland’s manor myself.”

“Oh.”

Sharon was the vice president of the tax collector association. When taking all these various factors into consideration, assuming her eagle form and riding on someone’s shoulder was surely the most optimal way to move about the city freely.

“If you understand me, then let’s be off. I’ll point you in the right direction,” Sharon said and readjusted her feet once, twice in order to have a stable grip on him.

Her fine talons did not hurt, either because his clothes were made of good material or she was adjusting the strength of her grip, and he barely felt any weight from her. If he mentioned how smooth her feathers felt as they brushed against his ears, Myuri’s eyes would surely bulge in so much anger that they would almost fall out, so he stayed silent.

Even still, Myuri stared hard and aggressively at Sharon as she rode on his right shoulder, and she was deliberately holding his right hand. It was likely so that she could immediately rip the bird to shreds if anything happened.

“Please lead the way.”

Even if Col’s voice did sound rather tired when he spoke, he was sure that

God would forgive him.

How people presented themselves was important.

Col was aware of that, but he still felt it was a little strange how obvious it was now.

Nobles engaging in falconry clearly had vast territories, so there was no one who would dare step in the way of someone wearing formal clothes and with an elegant eagle on their shoulder.

Even the wandering peddlers who clung like leeches parted the way for them, fearing the consequences.

Sharon gazed to the sky, paying no mind to the people of the city, occasionally whispering to him where to turn.

Myuri was upset as she always was, but it was not like Sharon was going to try any new tricks on her, so she soon stopped glaring and simply walked along with a pout.

The place Sharon brought them to was deep in the back of an alley. From the main avenue, they entered a densely packed residential district, passed by two wells where women doing laundry and fetching water were busy chatting, stepped over free-roaming pigs lying in a sunny little vegetable garden, went down a tight alley that could barely fit two adults side by side, and finally came to a run-down building.

“Is this it?” Col asked, but Sharon flew up without a word and went inside the building through an open window on the second floor.

“...This is really close to the church we were just at. Why’d she make us walk all this way? Does she think she can trick us? I’m a wolf.”

While her bad mood had been somewhat mollified, the valleys between Myuri’s brows were still rather deep as she spoke.

“This seems like an old city, so it’s probably full of blind alleys and dead ends.”

The locals likely had shortcuts that cut through other people’s gardens and kitchens. This space was for the locals to live in, not for visitors to enter.

As they stood there, Col felt like the silence around them was draining all the

sound from his body, so the occasional cry of a baby he heard in the distance was comforting. As he thought about how it reminded him of being in the forests of Nyohhira, there came the sound of a lock being undone on the other side of the door.

“Come in.”

The door opened, revealing Sharon wearing simple clothing in her human form.

For some reason, other people’s houses had a peculiar scent to them.

The moment they passed through the door, Col was overwhelmed by the smells of daily life that stirred old memories.

“Is this an orphanage?”

Still expressionless like a bird, Sharon raised an eyebrow.

“I’m surprised you could tell.”

“I was a wandering student when I was a child. I often found myself in the care of places like this.”

He had practically run away from his village, which was almost as remote as Nyohhira was, for a journey to master his studies. It was hard to believe now how naive he had been back then; wandering students without a family of money or status to support them were practically the same as orphans.

He had been in the care of houses that helped the poor and others without anywhere to go many times, and the smell of this place was just like that of those sorts of orphanages.

“I was convinced you were a young master from a good house.”

It felt like she had reevaluated how she looked at him, but it was pure good luck that he had managed to survive this long.

“Well, never mind that. As you’ve guessed, this is an orphanage, but they don’t accept just anyone.”

“Is this like...a Saint Lumeria charity clinic?”

Those were institutes run by a well-known religious order that took in only

those beset by particular illnesses who could not lead regular lives among other people. There were several places like that throughout the world.

Then, as Sharon closed the door, locked it, and was about to walk off, she paused and smiled for the first time.

It was an ironic, sad smile.

“We’re not altruists. The one I’m helping is a younger me.”

“Younger you...?”

Sharon did not answer and continued down the hall.

The building was old and rather run-down, but he could tell that it was still being carefully cleaned. After they passed several nearly empty, quiet rooms, Sharon stopped. None of the rooms had the luxury of a wooden door; they could see everything inside.

This room looked like a remodeled shed, and the children inside sat around a single adult, fervently writing on wooden boards.

“Sorry. Didn’t know you were in class.”

Col looked over Sharon’s shoulder as she called out into the room, and his gaze met the young man’s there, who was about the same age as himself. He could tell at a glance this person was a priest from his unique appearance. Judging by his clothes, he was likely a low-ranking pastor who dealt directly with the lives of the city people.

“Oh no, we were just about finished...But I don’t see you at this hour very often, Miss Sharon. And...who is this?”

Col realized it was not only the young man but all the other children in the room who were looking at him.

And those gazes were accompanied by a bad nervousness.

Col was bewildered by the reaction, but he then realized it was because of the clothes he was wearing.

“Don’t worry. He’s not a government official. Or part of a Church raid. He’s not an enemy,” Sharon said. “At least for now,” she added. “Come with us.”



She jerked up her chin, and while the young man seemed puzzled, he nodded and announced the beginning of the noon break to the children sitting around him. They seemed happy that their studies had ended early.

The children of varying ages left the room, not bothering to hide their curiosity as they stared at Col. They all moved to a different room, perhaps to the dining hall. There was still a small child sucking on his finger inside the room until a girl acting as his older sister pulled him along.

As Col watched the group depart, it felt like his surroundings suddenly fell silent.

“I don’t like kids much,” Sharon said, yet her expression seemed a bit softer. “And our guest here—this is the Twilight Cardinal.”

“Huh?”

It was not the young man who voiced his surprise but Col.

While he did not think the title was something to hide, he felt like revealing it to people was something that warranted a bit more structure.

And the young man before him was clearly a pastor. Right now, virtually all the places of worship in every town in the Winfiel Kingdom had their doors closed, and their chapels were open but unmanned. The crest of the Church had been removed even from the chapels in the parishes here.

That meant they were unable to hold religious services, and without religious services the benefices stopped coming and the clergy was unable to receive their salaries. He could believe that this young man was teaching here in order to earn his keep.

And here was Col, the person who was partly to blame for this young man’s suffering. In a sense, he was both a friend and an enemy, one who could bring about any kind of trouble to him.

It was just after he held his breath in fear.

A smile immediately spread across the young man’s face and he pushed Sharon aside, quickly approaching Col and tightly grasping both his hands.

“That means you translated the scripture into the common language, didn’t

you?”

“Huh?”

“I have heard the rumors, yes! But more important than that was the feeling I got when I received a draft of the common-language translation—I felt like my eyes had been opened! I knew right away that this was the future of preaching!”

His hands being vigorously shaken up and down, Col found himself at a loss, but it at least did not seem as though the man bore him any ill will.

With excitement and a great big smile, the young man let go of Col and then bowed deeply and respectfully to Myuri, then shook her hand. Myuri was rather surprised, but she was smiling brightly.

Then, when Sharon cleared her throat, the young man seemed to realize how excited he had gotten and straightened himself out in shock.

“I—I got carried away. I’m sorry. My name is Clark, Clark Komenda. I am a curate of the twentieth parish in the Rausbourne archdiocese.”

He slowly held out his hand toward Col.

Col noticed a callus from writing on the man’s middle finger, and he recalled the book from the chapel.

“My name is Tote Col. I am not much more than a wandering student. I am still a bit embarrassed being called the Twilight Cardinal...But more importantly, were you the one who put the book in the chapel?”

Another bright smile immediately crossed Clark’s face.

“Yes!”

His smile was proud and kind yet, at the same time, had a weakness to it that made Col want to help him. He thought that maybe all of those who decided to walk the holy path shared a certain kind of idiocy, like Myuri had said before, but it was Sharon who explained the reason for that.

“After the benefices stopped coming in, Clark used up all his money on paper and ink, despite not even having enough bread to eat for himself, and has been handing out books to chapels here and there throughout the city. He is just like

you, standing against those people from the cathedral.”

Clark gave a troubled smile, bashful in response to Sharon’s rough introduction of him.

Now that she had mentioned it, Col realized the weakness he sensed from Clark was a weakness as a living creature.

His skin was dull, which made his cheekbones stand out. The reason he wore such loose-fitting clothes was perhaps to hide how skinny he was.

“Please stop, Miss Sharon. The people from the parish have been bringing me things lately, so I’m not pressed for food.”

“You don’t look it. You’ve been giving your leftovers to the needy outside the orphanage, haven’t you?”

“Well, uh...But I’m also an enemy of the cathedral...”

Clark’s voice was frail, and he turned away.

Sharon sighed and looked to Col.

“People like him are the very few allies we have on the side of the Church. He even teaches reading and writing to the kids here.”

After glancing back and forth between Sharon and Clark, Col glanced to Myuri.

Myuri, who had been observing Clark’s lesson with great interest, noticed his gaze, but she did not look like she was on guard. It did not seem like Sharon and Clark were plotting anything nefarious against them for the time being.

“What sort of orphanage is this? Is this an institution under a religious order?”

There were almshouses, charity clinics, elderly care homes, and orphanages.

These sorts of institutions built in and outside of the cities were typically run by churches and religious orders.

If that was the case for this one, then it was rather odd that Sharon, a tax collector taking away the Church’s riches who was also an eagle avatar who wanted to drag the people of the Church out onto the street corner to string them up, could come and go freely.

“No, this is a private institution. My fellow tax collectors and I cover the expenses, and the rest is met by donations that Clark’s popularity brings in.”

That was a surprise.

Sharon loathed the Church, yet she placed a curate from the parish here to give the children an education. Not only that, but she had also said she was helping her younger self. That meant the children here had something in common with Sharon and the other tax collectors, but Col could scarcely come up with a reason that would explain it all.

That was why his guard was down.

Just like Myuri had said, he never saw the dark parts of the world.

“All the orphans here are illegitimate children of the Church.”

When Sharon said that, Clark looked as though he wanted to say something but instead dropped his head.

The tax collecting embodiment of an eagle spoke, her mouth twisting into a smile in overwhelming anger.

“Everyone here, including myself and the tax collectors, is what you’d call the ‘nieces’ and ‘nephews’ of the clergy. They cast us aside like garbage to save themselves the nuisance.”

Col had forgotten to breathe. He had not even considered that possibility, and at the same time, he now understood all the actions of Sharon and the tax collectors.

He of course knew this was a custom within the Church. No one was ignorant of it. The fact that many of these holy men were not supposed to marry yet had unofficial wives and families was such common knowledge no one thought of it as a secret in the first place.

One of the reasons Myuri constantly whined about becoming Col’s wife without ever learning her lesson was because she knew about this terrible practice.

But in that case, that also meant Sharon’s very existence carried an even more particular meaning. Sharon was not human, born as a result of a priest

who broke a commandment, and then tossed away—an illegitimate child.

“Now do you understand why I wish to see them hanged?”

These men selfishly brought them into the world, then selfishly discarded them.

Those same men went on to preach the virtues of chastity, honorable poverty, and piety.

Sharon had said “*hate*.” And now Col understood why she was a tax collector.

The job of a tax collector was one that accepted drifters, and even after an orphan grew and matured, they were still not fully-fledged individuals, since they lacked support. They were lucky to get any job, even if it was a position as hated as a tax collector. They had been through such hardship because of their birth, and yet, they survived. And to imagine after all that, whenever they saw a church in any town, they saw priests preaching the gospel of God and living good lives.

Not only that, but she was Sharon.

Myuri was born from the union of her mother, Holo the wisewolf, and Lawrence, a human, whose relationship was so close, it invited smiles from all those around them, even in the generally optimistic hot spring village of Nyohhira, which was full of music and happiness.

But not everything in life adhered to such wondrous ideals.

An example of someone who had walked the darker parts of the world, the parts Col never wanted to show Myuri, stood right in front of them.

“Twilight Cardinal...” Sharon murmured his moniker, and Clark, who had forgone eating in order to transcribe the scripture, also looked up.

“...Help us...”

Her gaze and words were so straightforward that Col could not even flinch.

“...Crush the rotting Church.”

Even in the back of a quiet alleyway, Sharon’s voice was hushed and calm.

And because of that, Col understood how deeply rooted her anger and hate

were.

This was not something that could be relieved with words.

“You said we might end up at war with them because of us, right?”

“Well—”

“Listen. You might be right. And the people of the Kingdom will fall into great misfortune because of it. But if we could destroy the Church here and now, there wouldn’t be any more people like us and the children here at the orphanage. Wouldn’t you call that justice?”

She was not doing this for her own self-interest.

There were countless people on her side who shared her justification and pain.

There was reason and righteousness in what she was doing.

“Or...”

Sharon looked down to her feet, then raised her gaze to Col in a glare.

“...You’re working with the Church, and you’re here to get in our way?”

Her right hand moved threateningly.

Perhaps the reason she had taken them here was not only to show her hand and convince them to join her but also to secretly do them in if their goals did not align.

What she was talking about was something that could not be solved by talking.

But also, it was hard to imagine she was tricking them with temporary lies and flattery.

Just as everyone was holding their breath to see what would happen next, there was a loud clattering sound from one of the rooms farther in. After a brief moment, it was followed by the sound of a crying child.

“...”

The crying was then joined by the alarmed shouts of the other children.

That was enough to relieve the malicious fumes.

“I’m going to check on the children, Sharon,” Clark said, patting her on the shoulder, then disappeared after casting an acknowledging glance to Col.

When he saw him do that, he wondered if Clark had originally planned on stopping Sharon. And, while this was also pure conjecture, he thought that perhaps Sharon knew Clark wanted to stop her.

Col sensed that was how familiar they were with each other.

“Hey.”

Unexpectedly, it was Myuri who spoke up at that moment.

“Hey, chicken.”

When she said that, Sharon, who had been looking down the hall after Clark, turned back to Myuri with a sharp gaze, but that did not frighten her.

“Tell me about you, chicken.”

“...”

Sharon stood speechless, and Myuri reached out to take Col’s hand and continued.

“My brother is pretty unreliable most of the time, but he can be pretty useful here and there.”

Col frowned at her rough way of putting it, but Myuri kept her composure and grinned.

“And all in all, he’s our friend. More importantly, he’s *my* friend, though.”

Regardless of whether or not they actually rivaled each other in that department, what Myuri said in her rough introduction was all truth.

Col cleared his throat to straighten himself out and then said to Sharon, “Miss Sharon, I don’t think I will be able to persuade you, and I do not completely agree with your goal of...vengeance by any means necessary. But I believe the malpractices of the Church must be righted. I may not be able to totally help you, but I’m sure there are other ways in which I can assist you.”

“At the very least, won’t be getting in our way, is that right?”

He was not so inexperienced as to agree with her right away. That was because this whole situation could decide the fate of the Kingdom.

After Col closed his mouth, Sharon stared hard at him, then gave a tired sigh.

“Either way, I guess that dog’s preventing you from giving it your all.”

“I’m not a dog, you chicken!”

It looked like a squabble between crows and dogs that one might see in town, but neither of them obviously seemed like they were being earnest.

“Fine. Things will be a lot easier if I can win your sympathy. Let’s talk,” Sharon said, then jerked her chin toward one of the windows. “It’s nice and sunny in the garden at this time of day. Perfect weather for a dog.”

“Grrr!”

Myuri’s growl sounded a little too convincing, so Col patted her on the head to calm her down, and they then went outside.

Buildings that could not be refined even out of flattery were built leaning against one another, creating a wall around Col and company.

This little garden was less like a courtyard and more like a space that so happened to come about when the buildings were built, but just as Sharon said, it was bathed in sunlight, and there was even some greenery. Little birds peacefully pecked at something in the grass.

“Get out of here, you.”

Sharon waved her hand, and the little birds flew off. Taming smaller creatures seemed to be an old trick that any nonhuman living in a city, not just Ilenia, could do.

“Now then, where should I start?”

There was a crate placed there for sunbathing and Sharon sat down on it as she spoke. There was only one other crate there, and Col was hoping to let Myuri have it, but she instead pulled him along and sat him down. He wondered what she was going to do, and she sat on his lap without a second thought.

While she tended to want to do things like a spoiled little girl would, she was

still sharp.

“What happened to your mother, chicken?”

She got straight to the point with a single breath, and while Sharon’s eyes widened, she soon just shrugged, perhaps because she thought it would be the easiest starting point.

“My mother was a beautiful golden eagle with golden wings.”

“Wooow, golden wings...”

Despite how Myuri called Sharon a chicken, she was purely fascinated by the idea of an eagle with golden wings. Sharon seemed slightly perplexed by her response, but she did not seem to be upset by it.

“And I don’t know how it happened, but she got involved with a priest from the Church. They lived peacefully for a while.”

A forbidden love between a priest, who was not allowed to marry, and a nonhuman, of all people.

How would the poets write songs about it?

“But when most of the members of the clergy get ahead in life, they’re required to clean up their affairs. Owners of churches in smaller towns out in the country might not need to do anything like that, since they’re practically kings, but it’s apparently a required procedure out here in the bigger cities.”

If a priest had to move from a smaller diocese to a bigger one, then the place they lived and everything else would have to change. Should their new home be located within the walls of a city, then they would have to prove themselves suitable, and if they had children, then it became a question of who those children belonged to.

“Of course, they systematically repeat the same rotten customs over and over. Priests are used to cutting off their wives and kids who are holding them back. They rewrite the baptism directory to change who the parents of their children are, and then they add names to the funeral directory to kill off a made-up husband. In an instant, that creates a widow and child left behind by a good husband. There’s nothing between the mother and child and the real

father. The documents prove beyond a doubt that they're living separate lives."

When she said that, Myuri stirred and turned to look at Col.

Her surprised expression read, *She's kidding, right?*

"It might just be on paper, but...I think it is possible."

Just like how public perception of people changed depending on the clothes they wore, ink and paper could easily change a person's entire existence.

"But still, the truth always gets out. The local people all know the truth anyway, right? Rumors naturally spread. The better the life a woman lives as a priest's mistress, the colder everyone around her would be and the more ostracized both she and her child would become. They usually aren't able to stay in their original town or village, or even the region, so they go far away. And then..." Sharon sighed, dropping her shoulders. "The kid gets in the way. Even with proof of identity, at the end of the day, the mother is still a woman who's come from far away with a kid in tow. She would absolutely draw attention in an inspection at the city gates. Maybe she's related to someone who committed a serious crime. Maybe she committed adultery and was chased out of her home. Or maybe...she's the mistress of some Church man or a noble and she's been tossed away." Sharon lifted her head, squinting at the sun, and continued. "Most mothers find themselves at their wits' end, and with little other choice, they leave their kid on the front step of a church or monastery. Isn't it ironic? Despite how awfully they'd both been treated by the Church, that's the only thing they can rely on."

"No..."

It was a grim tale, unthinkable for the daughter of the biggest lovebirds in all of Nyohhira.

"And so your mother...was the same?"

Myuri did not call her a chicken.

Sharon looked at Myuri and shrugged.

"The kids in the orphanage have been through pretty much the same thing. Clark was smart and was allowed to stay by his father's side as his 'nephew,'

becoming a curate who assists the pastor. My mother and I were different. Because she was such a magnificent golden eagle, who could encircle every house around her when she spread her wings, she couldn't just bring in my keep from the forest. If it was possible, she could have simply caught all the creatures in the forest and sold everything to the furriers and the butchers to earn a mountain of coin." But from the way she was speaking, that was not how it turned out. "My mother lived for a long time, and she knew what it meant to live alongside humans. She didn't hide how she never aged; she revealed her true identity, and they still crossed that gap and took each other's hands. That's how much they trusted each other. But even then..." The light disappeared from Sharon's eyes. Even beneath the sunlight, her eyes were brimming with hatred. "He betrayed her. All for the sake of his own success."

Myuri squirmed on Col's lap because she was overwhelmed by Sharon's open hatred.

"And my mother could not stand to be in the human world any longer. She left me behind and apparently flew across the western sea."

The loathing in her eyes faded, transforming into a more muted hue of sadness and sorrow.

However, something in her words caught Col's attention.

"What do you mean by *apparently*?"

Sharon lifted her head, then tiredly cocked it to the side.

"I was still an infant then. That's the story I heard from the elderly sheep my mother left me with. The old man was a shepherd at a monastery, of all things, and no matter how hard we struggled, we couldn't escape from the net of the Church."

That was why she wanted to set fire to and destroy everything. Much like the net she was entangled in, Sharon's hate had a tight hold on her.

On the other hand, Col realized how small the world was.

"Could that sheep have been a golden one?"

Sharon was clearly surprised.

“You know Huskins?”

“It seems all paths are connected and intertwined.”

What came from his mouth was an excerpt from the scripture, and Sharon huffed.

“Okay, then does that mean your mother went to the land in the west, where Ilenia wants to go?”

“Huh? Oh right, that...legend of the land to the west is talked about among the people who live in the Kingdom and those who live on the western shore of the mainland. The old man probably told that to me to calm me down. I don’t believe it.”

When Myuri, who believed in the land to the west, saw how flippant Sharon was about it, she pouted.

“I heard it from a whale. He said it’s not impossible.”

“...What?”

“But I guess the whale also said that he couldn’t swim all the way there, so he wasn’t planning on going...”

Sharon sighed, knowing she would not be able to talk sense into her, but Myuri continued to argue.

“But he also said there are unbelievably massive footprints in a really, really deep part of the ocean. And those footprints are heading west.”

“Footprints?”

Myuri stood and spoke.

“It’s the Moon-Hunting Bear.”

It was a legendary calamity all nonhumans and their close company would have heard about at least once.

Sharon blinked, speechless.

“...You’re kidding.”

“Are you calling me a kidder?”

It seemed like they would start glaring again, so Col interjected.

“It is most certain that Lord Autumn is not someone who would speak without good reason.”

Autumn, who was the embodiment of a whale, was also a difficult one, but he was not someone to tell lies.

“...The land at the end of the western sea...,” Sharon murmured, narrowing her eyes in displeasure.

There was said to be a continent in the western sea, to where Sharon’s mother flew off. It was entirely possible that Huskins made up the story out of kindness.

But Col felt like he understood why she would flatly reject the possibility that it might exist.

That was because in her eagle form, Sharon was an elegant and valiant creature and not entirely out of place in the forests like Myuri was. She knew her own wings probably would not be able to carry her all the way to that continent. Only a fool would get so worked up about a place she would never reach, and since she was not, doing so would only be painful.

Paradoxically, perhaps it was because Ilenia knew that as a sheep, she could not fly or swim in the first place, that she could chase talk about the continent.

As Col thought about that, Sharon stood from her crate and spoke.

“Whether the continent exists or not, I know what I need to do. I’m going to drag the Church dreck out onto the corner and string them up. I won’t be able to meet my mother without getting my revenge anyway.”

She was not looking for approval, and perhaps she was not even looking for sympathy.

She glanced over at the orphanage, then looked back at Col and Myuri.

“We’re up against the great organization of the Church. I don’t think we’ll ever get the chance to use tax collection permits as a shield to boldly pressure them like this again. Don’t get in my way.” She then walked off, and as she passed by them, she whispered, “Clark doesn’t know what I really am. Don’t say

anything unnecessary.”

Without giving them a chance to respond, Sharon opened the door and went into the building. They could hear the children making a ruckus from the gaps in the window.

“Hmph. Chicken.”

He realized Myuri was standing next to him, her hands on her hips.

“She’s just telling herself it doesn’t exist because she can’t fly there.”

It seemed she had been thinking the same thing as he had about Sharon, but he did not think she was a cowardly chicken.

“She has been through a lot. She’s being realistic.”

While people could not live solely on bread, they still had the scripture, but without any bread in the first place, giving them the scripture would only lead them to starvation. Sharon was here in this city now because of all the trouble she had been through.

“And it does not seem like Miss Sharon’s anger belongs only to her.”

“What do you mean?” Myuri asked, and Col slowly inhaled before answering.

“All the tax collectors have come together, right? Not only that, there’s this orphanage here. Miss Sharon is not the kind of person who can ignore those who have fallen on hard times. That is why the land in the west does weigh on her mind, but she must chase it from her thoughts.”

“...”

Myuri seemed dissatisfied, probably because she was still slightly angry at being called a dog, but she did not deny that was true.

Sharon had looked at the line of children as they went for food and said she did not like children.

Yet, the sharp-eyed Myuri could not have noticed that softened expression when that happened.

“I obviously agree with the reasons why that chicken is angry.”

She started calling her a chicken again, but Col instead felt a closeness

between them when she did, and he could not help the smile on his face.

“...Why are you smiling?”

“It’s nothing.”

As an older brother, he was pleased that Myuri had grown into a kind girl.

“But anyway, now I know who it is we need to drag over the coals,” she said.

He agreed heartily with that.

“While there is distance between Miss Sharon and us, we are still headed in the same direction.”

It was still good enough that they learned that Sharon and the tax collectors were not Heir Klevend’s vanguard for bringing chaos to the Kingdom and throwing it into a civil war. Consequently, there was no reason to see them as an enemy, and it was not reason enough for them not to work together. And even if the reason they were fighting was because of anger, he took that as a reason to demonstrate the possibility of reconciliation.

“But, Brother?”

“Yes?”

It was just after he asked in return.

Myuri leaped to him, almost knocking him backward off the crate he was sitting on.

“Wh-what is it?”

He wondered what it might be when he saw her wolf ears standing on edge under her hood and the fur on her tail standing on end under her robe.

“You’re not going to throw me out, are you, Brother?”

His breath hitched for a second.

He was confident he would never do that, and he was relieved to see that there was still a weak juvenility to Myuri, even though she acted so bold all the time.

He rubbed her slim back as she buried her face in his chest, and he said, “If

your tricks and rambunctiousness get to be too much, then I might.”

“Hey!”

Myuri looked up at him, and he returned her gaze with a smile.

“But you are a well-behaved girl, so there’s no need to worry about that, is there?”

She immediately huffed and buried herself in his chest again.

Her tail wagged about in displeasure, and she suddenly stopped.

And then she whispered.

“We’ll burn the damn Church.”

Myuri knew what justice was.

The tension in his cheeks dissipated and he kissed the top of her head, her face still buried in his chest.

“Young ladies don’t say words like that.”

Her tail then immediately began to swish about, and she groaned in protest. She was cuter than any noble girl if she stayed quiet, but it was times like this she was a rambunctious girl from the mountains.

Yet, she was angry on Sharon’s behalf. He knew she was just as high-minded as any noble girl.

“Come now, if Miss Sharon sees us again, she’ll make more comments.”

He lightly patted her back, and Myuri swished her tail about and then grumpily lifted her head.

She then glared at him with wide eyes.

“Hug me again.”

With a tired sigh, he did exactly as the princess commanded.

It was truly a big scoop to learn that Sharon and the tax collectors were not after money and not even Heir Klevend’s vanguard but that they were working off their own pretext.

It was an earnest fight regarding their past, which had nothing to do with the

principles of faith, but they were working in the same direction in the sense of righting the Church's evil practices, and Col believed it was also God's will that their pain be soothed. How could he loudly celebrate what was correct faith without supporting them?

They needed to cut the Church off from the merchants, avoid a situation where they would take advantage of the Kingdom falling into confusion due to a lack of supplies, and also take a stand against the Church, no matter what.

And they absolutely needed to right the wrongs of the Church.

"I guess the merchants are our priority here."

If they could only find out why they seemed so oddly cohesive, then they might be able to alienate them from the Church by driving a wedge between them. They would then lose their weapons that were the merchants and then perhaps hesitate in looking for a chance to start a war with the Kingdom.

However, while Col was rather confident when it came to complicated questions of theology, he was completely unfamiliar with trade. Not to mention the smoky, phantasmagoric hearts of merchants—there was no way he could ever understand those.

He grew nervous, wondering if he would be able to see through them, but when he looked at Myuri beside him, his feelings changed a little. That was because they had journeyed thus far, even though it was practically impossible. He was not the only one fighting here.

After leaving the orphanage, he and Myuri, his most dependable partner, talked about how they could deal with the merchants.

Myuri liked shortcuts, so she insisted she should dress up as an errand boy so a company would hire her, and then she could look into things, but in contrast, Col proposed that perhaps they should call over Myuri's father, Lawrence, if things started to get dicey.

Lawrence was once a talented traveling merchant, someone who had changed the entire economic landscape of the northlands practically overnight. Col doubted there was anyone else so reliable when it came to mercantile problems, but Myuri immediately responded with a frown.

Col did not think there was any need for her to be so coldhearted, but Myuri gave her reasons why.

“If Father comes, then that means Mother’s coming, too.”

Myuri loved to do things on her own terms, but her mother was the only one she could never disobey. And what others around them probably thought of as a loving relationship between husband and wife, Myuri, as their daughter, saw as painful.

Those sorts of feelings of hers were purely like that of a child, but they should be held in the highest regard, and Col personally wanted to leave calling Lawrence and Holo the wisewolf as their very last resort. He could not say he was independent if he would so readily rely on them.

“Hmm...Either way, it is true we lack manpower on our own. We could send a letter...Or perhaps we could ask Mr. Hilde...I’m sure Heir Hyland hasn’t heard from Mr. Hilde directly...”

As he hemmed and hawed, Myuri said something that made him go numb.

“That’s exactly why I should sneak into the companies here in this city like a spy.”

“Um, you know this isn’t a game, right?”

“What?! Did you forget how much I’ve done so far?!”

It was not the Golden Fern they were headed to as they chatted. Not even Myuri was insolent enough to go smacking her lips over mutton after listening to Sharon’s story and seeing the children in the orphanage. Though it was not much, Col had even quietly put some money into the donation box.

So after they had a bite to eat at the outdoor stalls, they made their way over to the manor Hyland was renting, but before they reached the gates, something caught Myuri’s attention and she sniffed the air.

“...Something smells good, something I’ve never smelled before.”

“Myuri, girls your age mustn’t be so immodest. And did you not just eat?”

Col spoke with exasperation, and Myuri made a hurt expression that she did not often make.

“Brother, you dummy! I’m not talking about food!”

“Is that so?”

“All you ever do is treat me like a kid! It’s totally different, okay? It’s like a really strong smell of flowers.”

He wondered if it might be candied petals, but a strong smell of flowers might mean perfume.

He thought about that as the servant opened the gate for them and they made their way onto the manor grounds, and under the open archway was a magnificent four-horse carriage.

“Heir Hyland has a guest. That probably explains the residual scent of perfume.”

“Perfume? Oh, that thing that smells really good but you can’t eat.”

He was a little relieved her appetite was more for food than anything else.

“And what a wonderful carriage. It must be a noble.”

“Where’d they come from? I smell so many good things I’ve never smelled before.”

The carriage was tall, wide, and could easily fit six to eight adults inside. There were elegant engravings on the lacquered body, and the subtle gold ornaments on key spots gave it a mysterious dignity.

The windows were also made of panes of polished glass, which could be an asset all on their own.

“Come now—let’s go.”

Myuri might end up crawling into the carriage should he leave her alone, so he pulled her by the hand into the manor.

If Hyland had a guest, that meant they would report on Sharon only once it was nighttime. He wanted to give his report on her and the tax collectors and then start seriously discussing how they might expose the ties between the Church and the merchants as soon as possible...but once he started thinking about that, they happened upon a maidservant who seemed to appear out of

nowhere.

Just as Col decided to greet her, then ask how Hyland was doing, she spoke first.

“Sir Col, it is good to see you. Heir Hyland and the others are waiting for you.”

“Huh?” he asked in response and looked over to Myuri beside him. Myuri also wore a strange expression, and she tilted her head.

“Could it be Mother and Father?”

He doubted it at first, but he could not think of anyone else who could have come all the way here to wait for them. There were very few people who knew they were here in the first place—Ilenia the sheep or perhaps even Autumn the whale. Either way, they were keeping whoever it was waiting, so they needed to go see them.

“Then, we will go to our room to change and then head over straightaway.”

Just as he said that to the maid, Myuri interjected.

“I think this is way better than our usual, boring clothes, though.”

Col was stubborn, since his usual attire was that of an aspiring priest, so having those be called “*boring*” was a compliment, but the maid said, “You have on some lovely apparel; it won’t be rude of you at all,” so he gave up.

“Then, I guess we’ll go straight there.”

The maid led them to the reception room. They passed from room to room, and it was after they passed about four austere portraits on the wall—two people wearing exotic clothing stood before a closed door.

“I have brought Sir Col.”

The maid gave an elegant bow to the two at the door.

Both wore long swords decorated in gold at their hips, which meant they were probably this guest’s personal guard. They had shapely noses, and their tanned skin and dark hair and eyebrows gave off the air of people who hailed from a foreign land; the clothes they wore were embroidered with gold and silver thread, closely resembling the actors he and Myuri saw in Nyohhira.

They were dressed exactly like the actors who portrayed tales of the desert that were so popular in the cold northlands of Nyohhira.

Col glanced over at Myuri, and just as he thought, her eyes were twinkling with curiosity. He was almost worried that her ears and tail might pop out.

“Come inside.”

One of the two spoke quietly, knocked on the door, placed his ear on it to listen for a response, then slowly pushed it open.

Then wafting toward them was the comfortable smell of flowers, strong enough for even Col’s nose to make out.

“Oh, Col, perfect timing. I was about to go send someone to get you.”

Hyland the royal went out of her way to stand from her chair and greet them.

It was an honor for her to do that for them, but just as he was wondering if that would not be rude to her guest, she graciously motioned for them to come into the room, and for a moment, he saw a serious expression pass over her face.

Myuri, of course, noticed as well. Her own expression, giddy with curiosity, immediately returned to normal.

Evidently, the person who had come to visit was a treacherous one.

“It seems the Twilight Cardinal has returned, honored guest.”

Col looked at the person sitting right in the middle of the long side of the banquet table in the long, narrow room and could not help his eyes widening. That was because this person was making the attendant girl hold an open umbrella overhead, despite being indoors.

And that umbrella was a bright, eye-popping red, animals and plants depicted on it with gold thread, with silver thread woven into the edges and hanging down along the sides like tassels, which was enough for both himself and Myuri to stare at it slack-jawed.

The only word he could think of for the umbrella was *luxurious*, and the attending girl was more beautiful than anyone Col had ever seen before. Her thick, luscious hair was decorated with slim gold ornamentation all over, and

beneath it, she smiled at him with almond-shaped eyes.

But it was only then he realized the girl's clothes looked exactly like the kind he'd seen the dancer girls in Nyohhira wearing, and the animals depicted on the umbrella were creatures that looked like horses with lumps on their backs.

And the guest sitting there so elegantly, face obscured by the umbrella, wore an extravagant robe that looked like a priest's garb but had delicate patterns embroidered into it, and they wore a unique green jewel around their neck. It was a jewel sung about in the epics of the far, far south; a land where the light of the sun was much too strong, where the people loved the moon more.

A desert dweller.

But even though Col might know stories about the desert, he had never been there, so of course he had no acquaintances there.

Right when he was wondering who it might be—

“Been a while, Col.”

Col was perplexed when he heard the voice from beneath the umbrella.

That was not because whoever it was knew his name. It was because he knew that voice.

“No...way...”

Indeed—there was one other person in the world who knew he was here.

The person beneath the umbrella waved their hand, and the attending girl respectfully moved the umbrella to the side.

What appeared was a face he had not seen in quite a long time.

“Miss Eve!”

When Col was about Myuri's age, he stuck fast to Lawrence and Holo while spending days with them that he could only call adventurous. He had met many people and experienced many things. If he had been told to list all the people from that time he could never forget, the name right at the top would probably be Eve Bolan.



She was a merchant of a different breed than Lawrence, a woman who was like a starving wolf that kept even the wisewolf Holo on guard. Hyland was right to be cautious.

However, Eve was often misunderstood because of her demeanor, because on the inside, she was not a bad person. Col knew she had achieved great success in the south, and it seemed she had accumulated even more wealth in the past decade.

“I haven’t seen you in ages, Miss Eve!”

Eve had always looked out for him, but since she was based in the distant south, the most they could do was communicate by letter.

Col was simply happy to be seeing her again, and he unwittingly rushed to her.

“I got a letter from that Ilenia. I had to come see you, so I arranged for a boat and here I am.”

“I see. But you’ve traveled quite a distance...”

“Well, I have my reasons...Heh, so that’s her kid? She looks just like her.”

Eve had also come to Lawrence and Holo’s wedding, so she of course knew Holo had a child. When Eve turned to look at Myuri, Myuri’s expression obviously tensed.

Suddenly, a wicked grin crept onto Eve’s face. Then, like a queen would to her retainer, she raised one of her hands and turned the back of it to him.

“Col, isn’t there a proper way to greet a lady older than you?”

He did not for a second think she was being arrogant. Eve loved theatrics like this, so Col fell to one knee like a retainer would, touched the back of her hand to his forehead, then gave it a light kiss. It was etiquette that a knight would use with a noble lady.

It seemed like both Hyland and Myuri had been holding their breath, but when Col looked up, Eve wore a carefree, delighted smile on her face, one that most would never expect a powerful multimillionaire to show.

“I taught you a knight’s etiquette for fun over ten years ago, and yet, you still remember it.”

“That’s because you taught me so much, Miss Eve. You also taught me there are people who are perfectly fine with putting their lives on the line for money.”

Eve’s smile silently grew and then demonstrated a merchantlike caution.

“My apologies, Lord Hyland. I got carried away with this long-awaited reunion.”

“Oh, it’s all right...”

Eve was a former noble of the Winfiel Kingdom who became a great merchant after losing her status. So of course she had an easy elegance that was as graceful as Hyland, who was a member of royalty, or perhaps even more so.

“I see you know each other.”

Hyland sounded baffled, and Col responded with a shy smile.

“Yes, ever since I was about Myuri’s age. Miss Eve also employs Miss Ilenia, who helped us not too long ago in Desarev.”

Hyland nodded in understanding, then turned to face Eve again.

“But why would the owner of the Bolan Company go out of her way to renew old friendships?” she asked as she offered Myuri a place to sit before she sat down herself, demonstrating she was a different sort of noble than Eve was. Or perhaps because she intended to stand on the same front as Myuri.

Myuri did not bare her fangs, but she was clearly upset. If she spoke, she might even say, *Brother, you cheater!*

“I happened to hear a little while ago there have been recent developments in the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church. And that’s when I received a very interesting letter from one of my employees. And what do you know, it said there is a boy who is still a little timid...Oh, pardon me, who is as pure as a freshly peeled egg being called the Twilight Cardinal.”

Col knew Eve was making a joke, so he stayed silent, but Myuri’s gaze was piercing.

He knew she was going to grill him with questions later.

“I am not much of a believer, but there are several fundamental rules that are deeply ingrained into me,” Eve said, slowly recrossing her legs. “One being that whenever I make a big deal, I absolutely see it through with my own eyes.”

“A big deal?”

“Yes. That is why I rushed all the way to this still-chilly land, Lord Hyland, and waited at the port, but I had no idea Col...Sir Col was under your care.”

She should have known he was working with Hyland, since she received her letter from Ilenia, and because this was Eve of all people. It might be nothing more than a show of humility, but still.

Sharon also said she put her fellow birds on watch, and Hyland also said that she stationed people in the harbor because she was worried about him.

When Col thought about how many people had their eyes on him, it seemed like the name of the Twilight Cardinal had completely taken on a life of its own, and that terrified him.

“The owner of the Bolan Company, said to be known to all in the south—talk about a big deal. And it seems you’re here to rely on the Twilight Cardinal for such a deal.” Hyland, leaning back in her chair, spoke in a noble-like way that she did not often use. And Myuri, sitting beside her, warily stared at Eve. “May I ask what your motives are?”

Eve deftly parried Hyland’s attack with a smile.

“When I was counted among the nobility of this country, I wasn’t much more than a fly on the wall, even in social situations. To this day, it is still strange to be asked anything by a member of the nobility.”

The atmosphere immediately tensed.

Col looked to Eve, wondering what she was planning, and, of all things, she impishly winked.

“Heh. My family completely lost our standing due to the previous king’s misgovernment, so we left this country. I hope you won’t mind a brief comment?”

It seemed Hyland was frozen, unsure of how to respond.

She was completely engulfed in Eve's presence.

"However." Eve straightened out her crossed legs and sat up, and her expression immediately tensed.

The atmosphere, which had been like an overripe fruit, suddenly changed to something more dignified.

"As you know, I am a merchant who was a noble before leaving this country. And at the end of a checkered fate, I collected enough gold to bring about countless fantasies. That is why I had the foolish thought of coming to a lord and telling her of my plan, but she probably wouldn't trust me."

Just a few moments ago, there sat a terrifying merchant from the desert.

But as she spoke with such clear enunciation, she was exactly like a noble reporting to the king in the palace.

"And so then I decided I should receive a recommendation from the Twilight Cardinal."

Eve looked to Col, and he found himself bewildered.

"Me, you mean?"

"Sir Col knows a lot about me. I might be slightly immoral by his standards, but at the same time, that also means I am someone he can trust."

She smiled.

"..."

Hyland looked to him, puzzled, and Myuri looked at him like a traitor.

But he sort of understood what his role was now.

Eve knew that anyone who looked at her would think she had some ulterior motive, that she was definitely plotting something, so she actually plotted to come out here. But she knew that without the guarantee of a third party, she would not be able to conduct trade.

And so she was asking him to do that.

If they had the mind to do it, a priest could easily fabricate records of where they were born, who they married, and where they died. Knowing someone and vouching for who they were on their own was more convincing than any amount of money.

Col obviously could not know everything about Eve, nor was he planning on insisting that he did.

But there was one thing he was confident about.

“I can trust Miss Eve when it comes to trade.”

That was because Eve would put her life on the line for money without batting an eye. She had saved Lawrence, Holo, and even Col himself, powerless as he was, back then from narrowly being killed.

And since she never learned to change her ways, in terms of the money of faith, he could even call her a martyr.

“But,” he continued, only because the wisewolf Holo herself acknowledged, for better or for worse, that Eve was a wolf in people’s clothing. “What could you possibly be plotting this time?”

Eve smiled childishly and said, “I was thinking about monopolizing the Winfiel Kingdom’s trade with foreign countries.”

Eve Bolan.

This miser feared not even God and had just as much vigor as she always had.

CHAPTER THREE



CHAPTER THREE

Col did not think Eve was the sort of person to use jokes and exaggeration when she was talking about trade.

That was why he could barely grasp the truth behind her words.

“Pardon, what did you say?”

And of course, he was not the only one; Hyland was the same.

“I was thinking about monopolizing the Winfiel Kingdom’s trade with foreign countries.”

With a delicate smile, Eve repeated herself word for word.

It was not a joke after all.

Col exchanged glances with Hyland from across the long table and then looked back to Eve.

“Miss...Eve? I don’t think you are the sort of person to make jokes about this. But...”

“It’s simple, Twilight Cardinal. You’re scratching your head over the long-distance merchants’ plot, are you not?”

There was no one there to scold her for using crude language in front of royalty. There instead was the odd reliability of someone who had opened her heart, which suited Eve’s character very well.

And it was even doubly so, since what she said was, in reality, right on the mark.

“You seem to have a more detailed grasp on the situation, Lady Bolan.”

Hyland also seemed to have gotten used to Eve by now, as she answered quietly but without fear.

“I’m confident that I do. And because of that, I knew I could possibly hit on a

big deal, and I just could not contain myself, so I came here. I think I know what you were thinking. Those chumps from the Church somehow ended up in cahoots with foreign traders and are trying to cut off supplies coming to this country. At this rate, you would either have to compromise in your conflict with the Church or end up entangled in war at a disadvantage. If you don't do something, then they'll catch you by the nose and take you for a spin."

Hyland wore a tense expression as she listened to what Eve had to say, and beside her, Myuri's eyes widened at the way she told her story. She was not repulsed by Eve's lack of civility in her choice of words, of course, but the opposite.

Myuri loved violent tales of mercenaries and pirates, and Col would not argue if anyone called Eve the boss of either.

Conflicting feelings of curiosity and hostility appeared on her face in a strange expression.

"And you have good ideas regarding that?"

The way Hyland spoke was much like how one would speak to a peddler who appeared at one's doorstep.

But there was no way she was as disinterested as she seemed. That was because while both she and Col knew the subtleties of the world of faith, they were entirely clueless when it came to the world of trade.

And then Eve appeared, who was like a great serpent that slithered around in the merchant world, which was already full of evil spirits; they should have welcomed her heartily and borrowed her knowledge.

The problem was that while they could trust Eve herself, she was still cunning.

"I do. And it's a way to make a lot of money, too."

What she followed up with after her assertion was unbelievable.

"The Church might want to pull the merchants out of this country in order to give themselves the advantage in war, but in their stead, my company will supply all sorts of goods from the south of the Kingdom."

It was only the left corner of her mouth that curled upward.

She was like an evil fox from a fairy tale.

“I’ll provide great amounts of wheat, endless cured meats, and enough wine and oil to create a lake. Of course, I’ll also bring in steel weapons, shined to perfection; carefully woven woolen goods; tanned hide; and all the raw materials and tools the craftsmen need to work. Naturally, ships that come in filled with cargo will also leave filled with cargo. I can even take on the market for wool, peat, and the specially made burning alcohol produced by the Kingdom and then bring gold to the people who live here.”

She would literally take all the trade into her own hands.

That was what she meant.

“...Lady Eve.” Hyland, however, spoke coolly in response to her preposterous story. “Do you believe you can turn that into a reality?”

“Of course I do.”

Eve did not seem to hesitate, not even for a second. She had been leaning over the long table, but she now confidently leaned back into her chair. Col might even believe her if she said she could split the sea.

Hyland was truly vexed and closed her eyes, as though enduring a headache, before speaking slowly and clearly.

“You are a merchant from the south. What you speak of would be nothing more than betrayal to the Church, which yet prides itself on its great power. On top of that, despite how the other merchants are working with the Church to stop trade, why would only your ships be allowed to continue to come for business?”

It was an extremely reasonable question, and it was unthinkable that Eve did not have an answer already ready. Everyone there turned to look at her; she made the face of a magician about to reveal her secrets, and her manner of speech turned to one more deliberate.

“I was once a noble in this land, Lord Hyland. That is why I will tell the Church that this Kingdom, which is so desperate for goods that hands are coming out of everyone’s mouths, trusts in my company and will come to me for help.”

“You’ll tell the Church...?”

“Yes. This is actually what I told them.”

Eve crossed her legs and changed the tone of her voice.

“Eve Bolan is a fallen noble who sold herself and her house to a merchant, but that merchant also lost everything after becoming bankrupt in the economic crisis created by the king’s misgovernment. While she managed to recover far, far to the south, it is her ultimate wish to restore her house, so she certainly hopes that she’ll be reinstated in her position as a noble by helping in this time of crisis. If she expresses such brave words to the king, he will surely and readily agree to this deal. But what all started this was misgovernment by the king, which led her to suffer plenty of hardship. Then, that would make this the perfect chance for retaliation. By doing trade with the Kingdom, she could extract all sorts of information to hand over to the Church, and on the dawn of battle, she would unilaterally halt all trade and plunge the Kingdom into chaos.”

Beneath her smile was either a lie, a joke, or her true feelings, hidden under countless layers.

As Hyland held her breath, Eve shrugged slightly.

“I think it’s quite convincing.”

This was not the place to cut in with a laugh, of course. While Hyland found herself overwhelmed, she somehow managed to compose herself.

“I see. And now that you’ve done that, you will be making a promise to us on the other side of the mirror.”

“Absolutely. I’ll give you all the information on the Church, and since I have a good grasp on trade in the south, I’ll catch wind of war preparations and strategies. I’ll even tell you what they’re having for dinner. After the war starts, it technically wouldn’t be difficult to smuggle in goods behind the Church’s back. The only problem would be how the massive amounts of goods would be taken into port. If we treat them like stolen goods from start to finish, then there would only be so much we could handle. That’s what would trip us up without the recognition of the local authorities.” Eve tilted her head slightly. “How about it? I won’t be gaining anyone’s trust without the support of the

Twilight Cardinal.”

The whole thing sounded made up, as though she was saying them she could only tell lies.

“The point is, I am happy with anything as long as I trade and make myself some coin. I do feel a faint homesickness for the Kingdom, but I no longer hate it or feel any single-minded devotion for it. So much the better now, since it goes without saying that I have no reason to support the Church. That’s because...” She turned to look at Col. “I’m a slave to gold.”

That was not self-deprecation; that was the source of Eve’s confidence.

It established the guiding principles of her actions and pushed her right in that direction.

People would call that faith.

“I understand what you have to say.” Hyland spoke gravely, staring fixedly at Eve. “But I don’t trust you enough.”

This insolent woman suddenly appeared with this outrageous story; perhaps someone drawing a sword on them would be preferable.

It seemed like Eve thought the same, and her cool smile remained on her face.

“And it’s people like you. You knew I was going to say that, and there’s still more, isn’t there?”

Lawrence had once told Col that a merchant’s basic principle was to never show one’s whole hand.

Eve folded her hands on her knees and smiled, satisfied.

“I was wondering who this nobody conning my cute little Col was, but it seems you do have some qualities worth noting.”

If Hans was here, he would surely foam at the mouth and faint over how rude Eve was.

But Hyland herself simply widened her eyes for a brief moment, then immediately smiled wryly.

“I won’t deny I’m a nobody, but if I stay this way, then I might no longer receive permission from his supervisor to approach the Twilight Cardinal,” Hyland said, then turned to look at Myuri beside her. “Isn’t that right?”

“Come here, Brother.”

Col had been sitting by Eve, on the opposite side of the long table from Hyland and Myuri.

Eve’s eyes narrowed in delight, and she shrugged.

“Go. A knight stays by his princess’s side.”

No other person could be more aptly described as a lone wolf than Eve.

He was sure the beautiful girl holding the umbrella behind Eve and the two guards standing watch outside the doors to the room recognized her as a master who deserved the most earnest of service, but he had a feeling that Eve herself looked at them with cold gazes from somewhere within her own heart.

So when she said that, he could not disobey. She surely knew more than anyone the value of trusting someone from the bottom of one’s heart.

And so when he arrived at Myuri’s side, she clung to his clothes and pulled him closer.

Perhaps it would have been easier if it was instead a passionate hug from a jealous girl.

“If you’re going to con my brother, then you have to go through me.”

It seemed that Col was the one to be protected.

“Heh. How cute. You’re just like her.”

Eve smiled and signaled to the girl holding the umbrella over her shoulder. The girl then took the white ermine coat hanging on the wall. Something like that was said to require a thousand white ermines to make a single coat—it was representative of the highest-quality goods.

“At any rate, I thought there would be no way for you to stand up against the Church if you readily accepted my proposal, no matter how desperate you may be...but there seems to be a bud of hope. This is a bit paradoxical, but I’m

hoping to continue to sell my idea to you,” Eve said, standing from her chair and placing her coat on her shoulders. “I know you’re skeptical of my idea, Lord Hyland. But I came all this way because I have solved this problem.”

“Then, what about the rest of your hand?” Hyland asked, and Eve gave a warm smile from beneath her coat.

“You’ll see. And of course, it won’t just be on a couple of sheets of parchment.”

“When?”

Hyland’s short question was packed with the nuance that there was no time to play politics.

“We should hurry, shouldn’t we? The conflict between tax collectors and traders is getting heated, isn’t it? The Church will doubtlessly use it as the spark to light the beacon for war.”

People needed reasons to fight, and the conflict between Sharon and the traders was a wonderful reason.

“That’s why tomorrow...Yes, why don’t we meet tomorrow at the Golden Fern? There’s a room out of sight from the eyes of others.”

Since it was a shop Hyland knew, there were likely special seats especially for nobility.

“But you will stand out way too much if you’re around, Lord Hyland.”

In that case, it was obvious who she would be calling on.

When Hyland looked at Col, he tucked his chin and responded.

“I adore Miss Eve, but I also know she can be ruthless.”

And then Eve continued.

“Since it seems like Col’s vision clouds simply because he’s familiar with someone, then that means my eye for other people has been clouded to begin with. And if this little girl here finds out that Col was forcibly pigeonholed, then she’ll go after my life. That’s the only thing I want to avoid.”

The way she said it almost made it sound like she was joking, but judging by

Myuri's expression, Hyland seemed to understand.

"Very well. I'll leave the verification of whether or not you can be trusted to the Twilight Cardinal."

"And me."

"Of course."

When Hyland added that, Eve began to walk off, as though signaling the end of the conversation. It was hard to tell who was of the highest standing in the room, but it was clearly Eve who was controlling the space.

Just as her guards opened the door, she turned around.

"Tomorrow at noon, is it? I'll have a carriage ready for you. All right?"

"I don't mind. But I'll provide the driver. I'll also contact the Golden Fern."

It was certainly not a precaution against kidnapping or poisoning, but Eve simply smiled and did not answer.

And finally, Eve looked at Col.

"We won't be alone tomorrow but in due time."

He responded with a bitter smile, and Eve narrowed her eyes and left the room.

The door clicked shut, and it immediately felt as though the room had gotten bigger.

Col was amused, thinking about how Eve was the same as she always was, but he noticed there were two sharp gazes on him.

"Are you going to explain this to us?"

That was Hyland.

"Brother, you cheater."

And that was what Myuri said in the end.

They asked about every detail of Col's relationship with Eve, but no matter how suspicious they were, he could not turn down her request. There was no one else who could be such a reassuring ally in the plot by the Church and the

merchants.

“She’s a strange one—I both want her to be in my country and, at the same time, I don’t. I recognize that she is a great woman, though...”

“It does not give you much peace of mind, does it?”

And she had really and surely brought to the table a plan that would prevent them from having a good night’s sleep. Eve’s plan was on a scale big enough that something like it could even be found in an adventure tale, but the world was cruelly large and complicated, one that was not so kind as to let people concentrate on one thing at a time.

There were other things they wanted Hyland to hear.

“So, Heir Hyland, I know we must earnestly examine Miss Eve’s story, but there’s also something else we wish to tell you.”

“What is it? Now that you mention it, you both came back rather early...Have you gotten a lead on something already?”

“Yes. And I believe it’s related to what Miss Eve brought to the table.”

Hyland tensed, not sure what she was going to hear next, but she nodded at him as a signal to continue.

“It’s the true motivations of Miss Sharon—I mean, the tax collectors.”

He then told Hyland what Sharon had told him, and her expression tensed in a different way from when they had been talking to Eve.

“This...is more personal now.”

There seemed to be a lot of overlapping circumstances for her as an illegitimate child, even though she was royalty.

“I think this erases the possibility they are Heir Klevend’s vanguard.”

“You’re right...”

Hyland pressed her fist to her mouth, thinking.

“Is something the matter?”

“Hmm? Oh, uh...,” Hyland responded, then sighed. “I’m deeply shaken.”

Shaken? Col was surprised, but Hyland gave him a rather troubled look. It was almost as though she was still deciding if she should say what she was thinking.

“It’s not unusual for me to see those from those bloodlines around me, you see, but...it’s still different from the world I know, so I’m perplexed.”

Hyland laid her hand over her forehead, took a deep breath to compose herself, and spoke.

“It would not be a lie if I said I wasn’t aware the Church was that rotten. From what I know, I thought the children created by priests were treated as their extended family and given lives that weren’t all that terrible.”

“You—”

“Just listen. It’s not unusual for nobles and the rich to build private chapels and monasteries in their own territories. There, instead of praying for specific things like successful military exploits or one’s family’s health, they foster the little lambs of God. Understanding supporters often even take in people who are on journeys of theological wanderings, don’t they?”

Books were luxuries, pens and ink cost money, and one needed a calm environment in order to think. It was not unusual for the houses of lords or the rich who had a love of learning, intellectual curiosity, or even feverous faith to become little gathering places for study.

“There are also plenty of those who build private chapels and monasteries for reasons other than pious ones, especially affluent merchants. They do it to make others pray for the success of their business and also to earn money directly. I’m sure you’ve heard that running places of worship makes a surprising amount of money.”

For example, by placing a magical holy relic in a small gazebo, people will come just in search of miracles. When people come, they spend money, and shops aiming to get their money pop up, and after a certain amount of donations, the gazebo becomes a shrine and then a large temple, and the whole place gets livelier and livelier.

What was it that brought profits to a purchased wasteland when it grew into a town?

Even if it did not go that well, it was not unusual to hear that there was still a good degree of trade to be conducted just by building inns that also acted as chapels along the highway for the wasteland in the empty expanse.

“And the priests of those private chapels and monasteries are often these ‘nephews.’ One would require approval from the nearest church for the guarantee of permit to construct these establishments, but since they’re private, they have no relationship to the Church, and the Church has no power of appointment over them, so the builder is generally free to choose who to hire. Therefore, it’s quite common to see the second and third sons of nobles who aren’t able to inherit the land, or second and third daughters who are unable to prepare a dowry and thus unable to marry, and these ‘nieces’ and ‘nephews’ who have nowhere to go hanging around these monasteries and giving sermons. These places are often crowned with the name of a noble or a rich person, so mostly all of them are splendid and made to draw attention, and, well, most of them live fun lives. I have several friends like that.”

Col had also heard of something like that, but he was curious to see how that would overlap with Sharon’s story. As he wondered, Hyland carefully, step-by-step, continued speaking.

“I thought these ‘nieces’ and ‘nephews’ were leading normal lives. They occasionally receive an education, and there are even some who end up as priests in higher positions than their ‘uncles.’ That’s because they already have a powerful ‘uncle,’ which gives them an advantage at getting ahead in life.”

She then took a slow, deep breath, perhaps to cool her anger.

“But after hearing Sharon’s story, it sounds like they’re in the minority. In the end...I’m just a noble, and I only ever saw the thinnest, topmost layer. They alter the baptism and funeral records to turn them into someone else’s widow and kick them out, right? If...if that’s an established practice, then I can’t imagine how many people have been made victims of these awful habits.”

There were quite a number of children at the orphanage where Sharon and Clark were. It was hard to think that they came from all over the Kingdom, but it was likely that all of them came from just the neighboring diocese. The dark underbelly was more widespread than even a noble like Hyland, who

understood the city life, could imagine.

Among them, it sounded like there were some who were welcomed as blood relatives, given a free life, and who made their way up in the world. But in contrast, that also meant there were plenty of selfish individuals out there who could not be bothered to care for them.

“I...was thinking that if it came down to it, I would stop the tax collectors. There was the chance that they might be Heir Klevend’s vanguard, and they were probably collecting the tax just for money anyway. Like what Eve said, I thought that whatever goals they might have would be inconsequential if they were going to be the spark to start the war.”

Hyland’s sigh was in response to the cruelty of the world and how narrow her insight was.

“...How am I supposed to stop them after hearing that story?”

While there were quite a number of nobles who insisted that the lowly people must not stand up to those in authority, Hyland’s anger was reassuring.

“I agree. However, as someone who loves peace, I would prefer to avoid war.”

Hyland, of course, nodded heartily.

“Emotionally, I am on their side. But to be honest, I think it will be difficult to stop them. Which means we’ll have to do something about the relationship between the merchants and the Church...And if we can’t do anything about that, then we will need a plan to make their intentions ineffective.”

And at this point, the whole train of thought was directly connected to what Eve talked about.

“What Eve brought to the table is a godsend. It will truly be our safety net,” Hyland said with a groan and then fell into thought, her fist still on her mouth.

What Eve talked about was a way to outwit the Church’s plans, but it was that much more questionable because of it.

It was not easy to simply reach out to a sudden ray of hope in the midst of hardship.

“Honestly, in reality, I would have you meeting the king and the first heir right about now, but we’ll have to put that aside for the moment...”

Hyland exhaled the breath she was holding, then spoke, leaning back in her chair.

“This is not something I can make a decision on by myself. I will have to report to the people above me, but then I’m sure this will just fill their heads and they’ll have no room to think of anything else. Not only that”—Hyland looked to Col—“the king is anxious about dealing with the Church, so it’s very likely he will use this idea. We can warn him of the dangers, but it’s much too convenient, and the profits are unbelievably huge.”

That meant Eve had come up with the perfect plan for the perfect situation.

“It’d be nice if it went well, but when considering what would happen if it didn’t, you should be distancing yourself from this incident. That’s because it’s only after everything goes well that we can sell our business as much as we want. The only time we can show ourselves to the king and those of authority is when they’re smiling.”

She said it almost like a joke, but Col had to admire how deep Hyland’s consideration was.

That was because, just as she said, there was no way she could make a decision on her own, since this whole affair dealt with the fate of the Kingdom. She would have to report to the first heir and also relay it to the king; if they decided to accept, then she would have to take on that responsibility.

Not only was the plot itself unbelievable, Eve was also a factor for worry, so none of them could say it was a favorable gamble even if their lives depended on it.

And yet, Hyland was trying to take on all the responsibility herself so that the king and the first heir would not have a bad impression of her.

“Also, I can see that you trust that Eve,” Hyland, turning the conversation back to Eve, said to Col. “Do you have a more concrete basis for it besides the fact that you’ve known her for so long?”

It was a given that Hyland would wonder about that, and Myuri beside him

looked at him with jealousy for different reasons.

It might not be as concrete as Hyland was hoping for, but Col gave the reason why he was so positively captivated by her.

“I think we can trust in her...only when it comes to trade.”

“Which means?”

Col ruminated on everything Eve had said, then responded.

“If there’s no other possibility for her to make even more money than what she told us about, then that means we can trust her.”

She would pretend to act as a spy for both the Church and the Kingdom and then single-handedly take over trade when it stopped. It was an entirely foolhardy way to walk the tightrope, but the profits were unimaginably large if she managed to make it across.

If Eve was going to betray them, then that would be when riches even beyond the scope of her unimaginably large profits appeared.

“...I can barely picture that in my head.”

“Neither can I, of course. But...”

“But?”

Hyland looked at him, and he knew there was no way he could stay silent.

“I can’t imagine that Miss Eve is trying to trick us.”

Perhaps he had that feeling only because she was an old friend. Hyland seemed to hesitate on whether she should point that out to him or not, but it was Myuri who interjected.

“...I kind of get what my brother’s trying to say,” she grumbled. “I feel like she’s an evil fox...But that’s exactly *why* we can trust her.”

She was right.

There was an animallike quality to Eve, and she gave others an impression that was beyond logic. Though everything that came out of her mouth was an icy calculation, there was a firestorm of whirling passion underneath that charmed everyone. It almost seemed like she had not even thought about such

an obvious betrayal.

“But all the same, I just can’t see how she can be honest. We don’t even know what sort of trap she’s set for us tomorrow.”

“It is true that she is treacherous. I know you’re nervous, Heir Hyland, but—” He continued. “Miss Eve planned to come into contact with us because she likely estimated that there was value in using us. Then, that would mean there should be some room for us to negotiate as well. If she’s planning something bad, then...we might be able to act as a seawall in that case.”

She would probably say, *Are you stopping me?*

But there was a reason why he had made up his mind.

“I do not want the Kingdom to negotiate with the Church in their conflict, for Miss Sharon’s sake as well.”

Myuri’s eyes widened, and Hyland nodded slowly.

“A legendary merchant who helped the Debau Company seize hegemony in the northern region runs the bathhouse Spice and Wolf. I hear that an elite and renowned mercenary company comes and goes from there and that a notorious slave trader on the mainland has admitted the bathhouse’s superiority. And you are their dear child. Just as she said—she must understand what sort of retaliation is coming for her if she lets you get hurt.”

While Lawrence, their support, was someone to mind, the one who Eve was really worried about was Holo.

Truly angering Holo the wisewolf was the same as setting free a legendary beast trapped inside thick parchment. An army of tens of thousands would still be eaten alive.

And of course, it seemed Eve had realized that Myuri had her own fangs.

“I don’t trust the evidence that the plan this woman is preparing will go well.” Hyland looked straight at Col. “I trust you, and I’m letting you handle it.”

He thought he saw Hyland exactly for the noble she was for a brief moment.

When Hyland found out that Col and Myuri had not eaten at the Golden Fern, she treated them to a feast that night in order to energize for their meeting

with Eve the next day.

They were amazed by the quail seasoned with saffron and other similar dishes, but perhaps the second-biggest city in the Kingdom was just the place for rare meats and spices, things that could easily be collected with the right amount of money.

If the merchants stopped all trade and war broke out, people would no longer be able to have regular meals, much less fancy meals like this.

Col was not so softhearted as to think that Eve had brought up her plan from such a humane perspective. But at the same time, he could scarcely imagine that she was deliberately trying to trick them.

If there was anything they needed to fear, it was that if they were at the level of disappointing Eve, then she would surely and relentlessly try to deceive them.

He wanted her to praise him *because* he knew she was such a terrifying individual.

Only Eve could draw out those conflicting feelings inside him.

That was why it was rather different from what Myuri was suspecting him of.

“Do you like bad older women like that, Brother?”

Hyland’s hospitality restored their energy, and it was when Col was cutting the wick for the candle as he thought about the coming day. Myuri looked at him like a traitor, asking him a demanding question for the umpteenth time.

“No.”

He snipped the wick with the scissors and responded clearly. He did not admire Eve as a woman.

“But you liked Mother a long time ago, right? That just means you like the tricky ones.”

“ ... ”

When Holo had told Myuri about the past, she occasionally told her stories like that.

It felt like she was prodding a healing scab, because he could not entirely deny it.

“Ms. Holo and Miss Eve are completely different. To me, Ms. Holo was like...a dependable older sister.”

“Mother always tells Father that you might overtake him someday.”

It was nothing but the usual loving quip Holo said to her dear husband, but Myuri took it seriously for some reason.

But at the moment, Myuri might have just been strung up from seeing the great woman who was Eve in person. At their princely meal not too long prior, she did not seem to be enamored by the delicious food as she usually was but seemed more like she was stuffing herself to get ready for the fight tomorrow.

Of course, it was not as though Col was thinking lightly of tomorrow's affairs, either. They could find out if Eve's plan was trustworthy enough, and then if it went well, they could turn the Church's plans into wasted effort, and then the Kingdom could stand up strongly to the Church as they always did. Furthermore, even if they could not clear up the hatred that Sharon and the tax collectors had, it would still give them a reason to continue fighting against the Church.

In short, their meeting tomorrow could turn out to be a big turning point in the conflict between the Kingdom and the Church.

So while Myuri worried that her unreliable brother's eyes would be clouded by infatuation, he could not say she was going overboard with doubt.

“Myuri.”

He called her name and looked straight at his traveling companion, who sat on the corner of the bed, her tail nervously twitching.

“I think your worries are ridiculous.”

“Y—!”

“However—” He pushed Myuri back down as she suddenly tried to stand, emphasizing the *ever*. “What happens tomorrow will affect not only us but a whole multitude of other people. Miss Sharon and the others especially.”

“ ... ”

“That is why you should be keeping a close eye out to see if my vision is clouded or not. I am sometimes surprised by how sharp you are.”

Myuri slowly sat down from her half-standing position at the same speed that her puffed tail shrank down again. He did not have ulterior motives to divert Myuri’s odd doubt.

He would freeze if someone told him to stand up to Eve alone, but as long as Myuri was with him, even though she might not be as mighty as Holo the wisewolf, it was more reassuring than anyone else.

“You look at me just as much as God in heaven does. You notice when I’m acting strange, don’t you?”

“I’m looking at you more than anyone else is!” said Myuri, puffing up her cheeks.

Her face looked like she was telling a joke, but when he saw the pools of tears gathering at the corners of her eyes, he was perplexed.

“Myuri?”

Realizing Col had changed demeanor, Myuri immediately composed herself and rubbed at her eyes.

She then guiltily looked away, raising her shoulders.

“I—I can’t help it. When I saw you in front of that fox, you...you didn’t look like yourself...”

When Myuri expressed why she doubted his relationship with Eve so strongly, Col’s face went blank.

Myuri must have thought it was his way of showing exasperation, so she pursed her lips and twitched her animal ears, but it was not.

That was because he himself had experienced reeling from seeing a facet of someone he thought he knew everything about just in front of the chapel.

“To be honest, I felt the same way when you were talking about Miss Ilenia.”

“...Hmm? Ilenia...?”

“Yes.”

When he told her about when he found out that Ilenia had given her advice that only another nonhuman could give, something that Col could never do, Myuri was clearly exasperated.

“What the heck...You’re so dumb!”

“...”

He could tell her that a father and older brother always wished for a young girl to stay young...but she probably would not understand, and Col knew he was dumb anyway.

“But okay, yeah, I get it.”

Myuri immediately gave a smug smile and leaped off the bed, taking wide strides to approach Col.

“If you don’t want what’s in your arms to get away, then you need to hold on tighter.”

She then whirled around, grasped his arms, then leaned against him and wrapped his arms around her. Her red eyes that looked back at him over her shoulder were narrowed in happiness, and her ears and tail flicked about.

“I’m not going to leave your arms, and you won’t leave my side. Isn’t that right?”

That would be the conclusion of their conversation, but he sensed something leading in Myuri’s words, and his intellect leaped to action.

“...Well, it depends, but yes.”

“Why won’t you just say *yeah* there?!”

She tugged on his arms and dug her nails into them.



“If I did, you would follow up with, *Then, you should make me your bride*, right?”

“Well, obviously!”

As Col sighed in relief, narrowly escaping danger, Myuri’s tail started thumping up against his leg.

But even though he was typically annoyed by Myuri’s cunning schemes, there were times—like now—that he had fun with them.

“That sharpness of yours will be a big help tomorrow.”

Myuri typically never listened to any of his lectures, but she froze when he said that quietly. She then started trembling out of excitement.

“I got it.”

She turned around with a dauntless smile.

If there was anything he could put more faith in than his prayers to God, this would be it.

“I’ll protect you, Brother.”

He did not find that audacious.

“Thank you.”

“Yep.”

Myuri nodded with a smile, and he returned the smile.

He placed the freshly cut candle right next to another candle stump.

If the light was about to disappear, then all they needed to do was add more and more.

The important thing was not to give up.

“Then, let us get ready for tomorrow and sleep.”

Not only that, but they had been spending their nights on hard boards as they traveled over the sea.

“Can we sleep together?”

It was either Hyland's consideration or because this was a room that people high in status stayed in, but there were two large beds.

"If I say no, you'll just come in anyway."

"Heh-heh."

Myuri smiled happily and threw herself onto the bed first. Meanwhile, Col closed the shutters and windows, capped the candles, and put out the light. Just as he started to make his way to the bed to sleep, he found that Myuri had already fallen asleep during that short wait.

He had a feeling she would not notice if he went to the other bed, but they were going to fight together tomorrow.

He hesitated a moment, then lay down next to Myuri and pulled the blanket up to his shoulders.

He felt like Myuri was smiling in the darkness, but before he could check, his consciousness sank into the depths of sleep.

The next day, they once again donned the clothes that Hyland had lent them, boarded the lacquered carriage that Eve had allowed them to use with the driver who Hyland had prepared, and Hyland, who stood there to see them off, said, "I don't think anything will happen, but on the slim chance you find yourselves in danger, I've stationed people nearby."

It was probably a common occurrence in the noble world of intrigue.

"Thank you. I will do my absolute best to be of use."

Then Hans closed the door, and there came the sound of the driver whipping the horses.

Myuri had slept well the night before and had stuffed herself full of the food meant to gently break the fast of the nighttime.

They were plenty ready for battle.

"I'm excited to see what kind of shop it is, Brother."

But he was not sure she said that because she was still relaxed or what. He was about to tell her that they were not going there for fun but opted not to. It

was more of a relief for him if Myuri stayed the way she always was.

The carriage exited onto a crowded street, as the streets always were, parting the sea of people to move forward. The city looked entirely different from within the carriage, and Myuri was glued to the window, watching the scenery go by.

It finally seemed like they had come to a street that was less crowded, because they had turned onto a wide avenue.

As though it was some sort of indication, Col noticed the stream of people had suddenly cut off, and he was then surprised to see their field of view suddenly open up before them.

“Woow!”

It was apt that Myuri unwittingly cried out. The grand plaza was literally a grand plaza, and it was almost as though the sky had suddenly fallen down.

“This is amazing!”

This was the first time they had seen an endless stretch of flagstone pavement. The others standing still in awe in the plaza were likely travelers just like they were.

The fate of the Kingdom felt like something that could be manipulated with one hand, but in reality, the Kingdom included this plaza, the streets around the plaza, the residential areas, and the tens and hundreds of towns and villages that existed elsewhere. To shoulder the responsibility of the future of all that, and how that felt, was something Col did not want to imagine.

But this meeting they were heading to would bring about one change or another in the Kingdom’s fate.

As he sat holding his breath, Myuri, who should have been getting worked up about the scenery, reached over to grasp his hand, her gaze still trained outside.

He inhaled—he had to do everything he could—and that was when he noticed.

“Doesn’t something smell good?”

“Yeah. The whole plaza smells like sheep.”

Before long, the air filled with the delicious smell of grilling meat, strong enough that his own nose could tell. At the same time, the sparse crowd started to gather again, and he could hear the sounds of merrymaking that belonged only to taverns.

They finally arrived at the Golden Fern, and it was less like a tavern and more like a giant studio.

“...In—” —*credible* was what Myuri wanted to say, but she swallowed the rest of that word, too.

They were first surprised by how lively it was under the eaves at the front of the shop when they alighted from the carriage. There were several simple stoves set up outside, and massive amounts of mutton were being cooked on them. Craftsmen, merchants, and travelers sat at the rows of long tables in the corner of the plaza, looking at the thick, delicious-smelling smoke billowing upward with gluttonous gazes.

They were not roasting pig but lamb, and shirtless, muscular men put on a show of turning the skewer on the spit in time with the performance of the minstrels, who were there for tips. Even Myuri, who would leap forward in joy at the sight of meat, was so overwhelmed that she stood still.

“...Is there a festival today?”

It was so lively that Col understood how she felt when she said that, but this was very likely a daily occurrence.

The carriage driver also doubled as a guide, so as they were about to be led into the shop, Col tugged on Myuri’s hand and they went inside, avoiding the drunks as they went.

And the inside was just as busy as the outside.

“Is this a store...? Is this really a store?”

This was different from all the other ways Col knew taverns could look. The ceiling in the atrium was unbelievably high—about five or six stories—and it reminded him of a metal refinery.

And half the first floor had rows of firepits like there were on the outside,

which made it the kitchen, and the flames and smoke shot out with the vigor of a shriek. The rest of the floor was stuffed with long tables, the guests sitting at them, squeezed among one another, shoulder to shoulder, all making a great ruckus.

When Col lifted his gaze slightly, he could see the second floor. There were rows of round tables, and the people sitting at those tables seemed comparatively well-off. He also spotted the stairs that went up to the even higher floors, which probably housed private rooms that cost a seat fee. Eve was likely in one of them.

Their guide called out to a staff member, and as they were greeted graciously, the massive banner hanging above them in the enormous atrium shuddered. Embroidered on it was the image of a sheep, many times bigger than any human.

This was a booming restaurant in a great big city.

He could not help but feel a divine dignity in response to its energy.

“Come this way, you two.”

They were complete yokels, straight from the countryside, but they returned to reality once their guide spoke.

This made him worry about what was coming next.

They went up the stairs and could see across the entire first floor. He could stay here watching the scene for hours, but they continued upward. He was not imagining the feeling of stares from the other patrons; they were looking at them, wondering who it was who was headed for the special seats.

If Hyland had come here, then people would surely suspect right away that something was happening. In that sense, it was rational that it was Col who ended up being the one to be summoned, but there was no way that Eve did not have some kind of trick up her sleeve.

The moment their guide knocked on the door to the private room, which was being guarded by the two they’d seen at Hyland’s manor, and the door opened, he knew his guess was right.

“You’re here.”

There was a large table set before the friendly Eve, and an immense hunk of mutton, freshly cooked, the juices still flying off it, sat enshrined in the middle.

And lined on either side of the table were shady-looking men, well-dressed but with a sense of ruin about them.

“And who are they?”

Numbers were a decisive strength, no matter the battle.

The reason he asked that before sitting down was because it was the least he could do to protect himself.

“Hmm? Ah, don’t worry about them. I didn’t ask them to come here to force you to do anything,” Eve said, smiling. “They are the very proof that my plan will go well.”

All of them immediately wore affable smiles and made the gesture of removing their hats.

That was a merchant’s gesture.

They were probably merchants of the greatest caliber, but an impossible idea flashed into his mind.

“Miss Eve, don’t tell me that...they are...”

Eve’s smile turned into that of a fox, and once she bared her teeth in a delightful grin, he was convinced. The merchants here were the city traders, conspiring with the Church to put the Kingdom in a bind. The mystery of why the traders were not betraying anyone and why they were working together with the Church was solved in that brief moment.

Hyland had found it strange how cohesive the merchants seemed, since they typically would not hesitate for a moment to undercut their peers if it meant turning a profit.

But *if they were all betraying the Church*, then that was a different story.

“Now, take a seat. The lamb here is exquisite.”

How could he say that he would not end up becoming part of the meal?

Yet, the reason he managed to take a step forward was likely because Myuri was beside him, but also, even if he wanted to pull out, the door was closed.

More importantly, there would be no point in having come here if he did not see through their plot.

“...I am Tote Col, Heir Hyland’s representative.”

Everyone besides Eve stood, exchanging handshakes with him over the table.

The moment he sat, his glass was filled with wine.

“First, a toast.”

Following Eve’s lead, everyone raised their cups.

What sat at the center of the table was a whole roasted sheep.

It had been lathered with layers of oil extracted from tree nuts, roasted slowly over a long period of time, and then finally seasoned with black pepper. That combined with the scent from the lamb itself was so good, it practically paralyzed Col’s sense of smell. Even for someone who avoided eating meat as much as possible, his mouth watered.

“Eat. This table is my hospitality.”

As she said that, a towering man who stood behind her pulled out a knife. He acted as both a bodyguard and a butler, and he so deftly and elegantly cut the meat from the ribs. The fatty meat was placed onto a piece of hard bread, which served as a plate and was placed in front of them. Despite how much breakfast she had eaten, Myuri’s eyes glittered, and when Col was given an even larger piece of meat, he spoke up, flustered.

“I—”

“What, are you eager to hear the sermon of the hermit in his hermitage?” There was a slight mischievous smile on Eve’s face as she sipped her wine.

Suddenly, Col felt as though he had returned to being the child he was over ten years ago.

He knew the story of the hermit, of course. It was a staple story told at times like this.

“...The hermit said, there is no meaning in asceticism for asceticism’s sake. God’s teachings of asceticism do not say to disregard one’s neighbor’s kindness...”

“Exactly.” Eve nodded, satisfied. “And it seems our princess knows her banquet manners.”

When she said that, Col looked to Myuri, and despite how they had just been given their portions, she had already put the last big piece of meat into her mouth.

“You want seconds?” Eve asked, seemingly enjoying herself, and Myuri swallowed the piece, then defiantly responded.

“Yeah!”

He would typically reprimand her for being rude there, but perhaps he should be more impressed that she was not being timid. The towering man gave Myuri an even bigger piece of meat, and she seemed delighted.

“Now, in regular meetings, I would offer drink until the other’s faculties for thinking were weakened before bringing up the topic at hand, but... unfortunately for me, I don’t think that’ll work on someone whose principles include asceticism and moderation like you.”

“Are we briefing already, Lady Eve?” the portly merchant on the left asked.

“Yes. I’ve been talking about my plan, but I’m stumbling over getting the Kingdom’s trust. My recommendation to Lord Hyland hinges on whether or not I can persuade the Twilight Cardinal here or not. If we can get past this, then think of it as the Kingdom accepting our plan.”

Eve flashed Col a meaningful smile that said, *Isn’t that right?*

“I see.”

The merchant wiped his mouth on the soft-looking linen cloth he had on hand, signaling to the other merchants with just a look.

There was a unique air about them that was different from the priests and the mercenaries.

“In that case.” As though the merchants had come to some sort of conclusion,

the portly merchant who had first spoken to Eve straightened himself in his seat. “My name is Pedro Arugo. I am the representative of the Arugo Company’s trading house here in the Winfiel Kingdom. We mostly deal in fabrics.”

Then the scrawny merchant with a goatee beside him continued.

“I am the Rausbourne manager of the Matteo Company, Stan Matteo. We take care of foodstuffs from the south.”

Next was the merchant on the other side of the table, sitting opposite the previous two on the other side of Eve, who had a mustache and seemed rather well proportioned for his age.

“I’m Guillain Aurelius. I deal with goldwork, silverwork, and other metals.”

Once everyone had introduced themselves, Col shook their hands again. Their palms were not as hard as those of craftsmen, but the odd space between their index and middle fingers meant they held quills too much.

“These three here are on top of this city’s traders’ association. If you also count the other companies that have pledged their cooperation, this accounts for about eighty percent of trade.”

These people were not the sort one could typically just call up and see. Col almost flinched, but when he remembered how brazen Myuri had been to eat mutton so heartily like she did, he persevered.

“I thank you so much for the honor of being able to sit with the great Twilight Cardinal at his zenith. I was certainly surprised to learn that Lady Eve was acquainted with the Twilight Cardinal,” Arugo said first.

“His Eminence and I are old friends, you see. He even saved my life way back when. It was when he was still a young, cherubic boy.”

“Oh-ho. Does that mean His Eminence was under God’s protection even back then?”

Merchants always talked in exaggerations.

“This is most certainly God’s will, though. There is no questioning that us being able to meet you today is what God intended,” Matteo said, and all the

merchants turned to look at Col.

He had made up his mind, and excessive bargaining was exactly their field of expertise. He decided to get straight to the point.

“I am also honored to be able to meet you. I do certainly want to hear what you have to say, so...why are you here? Are you not allied with the Church?”

He thought they might flinch, but they received his question with a smile.

They were veteran merchants, so of course Col was not surprised.

“We are allies of the Church. But things are a little complicated,” Arugo said, then lifted his sleeve and rolled it up, then placed both his hands on the table.

This was an action that gamblers used to demonstrate to another that they would not cheat, and Col knew well that it meant he had the disposition of someone who was in charge of a large company’s banner in a land far away from their home.

Even though they were supposed to be cooperating with the cathedral and working on their side, they sat next to Eve as if it was no big deal. He had been skeptical if Eve alone could monopolize the smuggling trade between the Kingdom and the mainland like she had said, but if she had plenty of coconspirators in the enemy camp, then her possibilities were endless.

And then, Col finally understood why Eve could not tell this directly to Hyland.

Who on earth would believe her if she told them this plan?

“You’re allies...? If you’re working with Miss Eve, then does that not mean you’re betraying the Church?”

Then that might possibly mean the merchants would be allied with Col and company, but since they were betraying the Church, it was entirely possible they would double-cross the Kingdom as well.

He had to be very careful about what they were planning.

“You could say that depending on perspective, but we have no intentions of betraying anybody.”

“It means they’re allied with both the Kingdom and the Church, Col. Our only

enemy is the tax collectors.”

When he heard Eve say that, he felt like he was being made a fool of.

Beside him, Myuri looked on with a suspicious glint in her eyes, her fangs visible as she ripped into the mutton.

“What are you all trying to do?”

He could not expect them to answer his question honestly, but he knew what sort of lies they would tell. Hyland probably did not think he would be able to discern their truth right away, either. He had to return with the information of what Eve and the others said to him and how it felt to be in that room.

And then Eve spoke.

“To keep the scales in balance.”

“The scales?”

“Yes, Your Eminence. In order to keep the scales in balance, you will need to place things of the same weight on either side, and that is why we need to be on the side of both the Kingdom and the Church.” Mysterious words poured from Eve’s lips, wet with wine. “We want them to fight on equal terms. Forever, preferably.”

As Col found himself bewildered by the devilish mood, Myuri beside him swallowed her food and then spoke.

“Because fighting uses lots of things, Brother. And when people use a lot of things, these people’ll get rich.”

She loved hero tales, and she would never leave mercenary Captain Luward’s knee whenever he came to the bathhouse, so she knew things that would put merchants to shame.

“My, what an intelligent girl.”

“If you’re thinking about hiring her, I have dibs,” Eve said pleasantly, then placed her cup on the table. “If you understand that war is the chance to make money, then you understand half of it. We have another reason.”

Arugo continued for her.

“We hope to avoid a situation in which one side wins. You are appealing to the Church for a reform, Your Eminence, is that correct? In that case, think of what would happen if the Church won over the Kingdom.”

The Church would brush aside this chance to reform and claim victory.

If that happened, the forces that defied the Church would likely stay in hiding for a while.

Now, long after the war with the heretics ended, there would be no more enemies of the Church.

“Can’t you imagine what would happen to their tyranny?”

He was right, and before Col could say anything in response, Matteo spoke.

“You must think, in that case, we should offer our services to ensure the Kingdom wins.”

These were merchants, the best at seeing through others’ thoughts.

While Col gritted his teeth at the feeling of being led around by the nose, him losing his cool was just what they were hoping for.

“I...hope the Church will reform. The Kingdom must win in this war in order for that to happen.”

“Your Eminence.” Aurelius shook his head, a sad expression spreading across his face. “We cannot have that, either. That is because not even we can begin to imagine what would happen if the Kingdom was to win against the Church.”

“Huh?” Col responded with a furrowed brow, and Eve spoke.

“Col. The Church’s tyranny drives us crazy sometimes, too. Especially when they leave their debts unpaid. I don’t know how many of my fellow merchants have gone under because of that. But in the end, even though they denounce the money we worked so hard to make as dirty, they live in luxury. We hope they’ll start being a little more honest, too, just like you.”

It did not feel like she was simply flattering him; that was true anger.

Eve, however, sighed slowly.

“But on the other hand, that tyranny saves us sometimes, too. More

correctly, it's not the tyranny itself but the source of power that tyranny creates."

"Your Eminence, the Church's wealth and power that are talked about in town are not completely evil. The world needs them."

As Col found himself in such shock he could not even voice his disbelief, Eve continued.

"It's like a knife. You can't travel without one, but it can also kill people. The key is how one uses it—just because there are people out there who don't use it in good ways, that doesn't mean we need to rid the world of knives, no? Of course, I'm not saying we should ignore their evils because they're useful. But talk of leaving only the harm and taking only the benefits is much too unreasonable."

He was used to unreasonable quarrels with Myuri.

He should not talk back but ask.

"What are those benefits?"

Those benefits allowed the Church to build up wealth and abuse their power. It brought about miserable souls like Sharon and the others, yet there was no way there could be justice in simply staying calm.

While he might not know anything about trade, he knew what justice was.

"Listen for a moment, Your Eminence." Arugo leaned forward slightly, took his cup in his hands, and lightly swirled around the wine inside. "Have you ever imagined how this wine might have come to sit on this table?"

Even though Col knew that merchants never took talk that was inconvenient for them head-on, he still found his face growing hot with the anger bubbling inside him as this man avoided his question with a straight face.

"That is not what I am talking about."

"I am not trying to confuse you," Arugo said with a sincere expression, and without waiting for a response from Col, he continued. "It's the process this wine takes in order to come sit on this table. We could even talk about this wheat bread here—all these products came from far away, passed through the

hands of many, carried all the way here to the Kingdom without interruption. The Kingdom—no, all the countries of the world function along these lines.”

Col was already well aware of that. That was the real value in the traders threatening to pull out of the Kingdom.

And how was that related to the justification of the Church’s wealth?

Almost as though he had heard him groaning internally, Arugo nodded silently.

“The problem is that trade comes with conflict.”

Col’s irritation only grew because nothing he talked about was relevant to anything else.

He was starting to think that perhaps it was time to kick back his chair and leave.

“Do you understand, Your Eminence? Let’s say a company from the south goes to purchase furs in the northlands. And then, let’s say once there, the company gets into quarrels with the local vendors over whether or not they paid, or the quality of the goods being fraudulently terrible, or there’s not enough, and so on and so forth. In times like these, the company that has come from far away is in the weaker position. No one is there to protect them, and the local authority sometimes even comes to dupe them out of ill will.”

Arugo spoke fluidly and without hesitation in a calm, mercantile manner.

He then struck his index finger onto the table.

Matteo took over.

“And then, it is the Church that helps them. The Church exists all over the world, and many will prostrate themselves before their might. Even in the farthest of lands, with no one to rely on, if the local powers cause you unfair problems, then the Church is there to help.”

What Col suddenly recalled when he heard him say that was the church in the northern islands. The Black-Mother faith, deemed heretical by the Church, was strong in that region, and not only that but their surroundings were shut off by a frigid sea—it was the sort of place one would never come home from without

help from the locals. Even an idiot would know that it was pointless to be aggressive with locals in a place like that.

Outsider merchants still came together to build a church, even in a place like that. There, they understood one another's language, and everyone followed one another's common sense. If war came, it would surely give them shelter.

The Church acted as binding nodes.

Strength that could turn into violence could also protect others.

"The Church acts as a mediator when merchants get into quarrels, and many merchants follow the Church's decisions. That is because if one defied the Church's authority, that would mean making an enemy of the Church organization throughout the world. That would mean losing the Church's backing, and we would no longer be able to engage in long-distance trade. And then..."

Aurelius continued after that.

"Plenty of money is required in order to build churches all over the world and secure authority. And people will not bow their heads to the shabbily dressed. Obvious power, like enormous cathedrals and gold and silver ornaments, is a necessary armor, as well as a weapon."

"Of course, the war with the heretical faiths and the pagans was necessary for the Church to maintain its authority, and that also cost money. Their wealth is absolutely not useless. As a result of that, however, it is true that people think they are indulging in unreasonable pleasures, and there are people among them desperate for additional profits."

"However, while that is an unavoidable and evil, as it were, cost, it is a mistake to mind only that cost but denounce the whole. The Church's vast wealth allows them to keep their authority, and the trade of us merchants is protected by their continued wealth, and the trade of the merchants supports the lives of many people. Everything is connected, Your Eminence."

What they were talking about was the makeup of the real world, which was not written about in the scripture.

"If the Kingdom was to subdue the Church at this rate and the Church was to

lose their authority, please try and imagine again what might happen.”

What would happen if the Kingdom won in the conflict with the Church? What would happen if the Church’s power was dampened, if they lost their overwhelming authority and cohesive power and were also forced to give up their economic muscle?

They would have to live a clean existence. The world would be a better place...

Matteo’s bright-green eyes, typical of someone from the south, turned to Col.

“I’m sure you’re thinking that you would fix the conduct of the Church while their pride is hurt, Your Eminence, but I doubt it will go that easily.”

“Once someone who used to throw their weight around grows weak, those trying to supplant them will start popping up. Conflict like that would happen all over the world.”

“It would be blind, rampant chaos. That’s exactly why...”

And then, once all three of the merchants had spoken, Eve took over.

“People would regret it and almost wish they could go back to the time when the Kingdom and Church were just staring each other down.”

Col could barely tell where the truth stopped and where the lies began. Their relation of the topic seemed incredibly logical but also just off in general.

How was he supposed to believe being told that the Church’s tyrannical power needed to stay as it was for the stability of the world?

But the merchants continued on the offensive.

“If the Church lost their authority, where should us traders ask for support and mediation in such a faraway land, without any acquaintances nearby? Or maybe we should just give up on trade and go home? Plenty of people would be in hot water if that happened. No one can find all the things they need to live from one single land. Trade is necessary.”

“For example, if we got wrapped up in a trade conflict in a distant land that we had never heard of, would the Kingdom of Winfiel come help us?”

“Not only that, should the Church’s strength diminish, the heretics and pagans would gain strength again. The world would only return to a time of war like it was in decades ago.”

Col could barely get a word in, but Eve simply began talking slowly.

“Col, the world doesn’t work on logic. Power is necessary in order to preserve order. The one at that apex is the organization of the Church. They may seem evil, but they are an absolutely necessary entity.”

The merchants lived in a realistic world. And they were fighting in order to preserve their realistic world. The reason he had nothing to say was absolutely because of what Sharon said.

The weak had no choice in the end but to rely on the Church, and it was only the Church that could help them. It was certainly an idealistic thought to tell them to preserve their functions as protectors with diminished power.

Not only that, but a weakening Church was not only a problem of faith but would also affect trade, which supported the lives of the people. On the contrary, the order preserved by the Church’s authority would suddenly collapse, and the world would return to an era of war.

The table fell to silence.

The four merchants looked at Col.

“Well, it is true that the way high-ranking clergy act is egregious,” Eve said, concerned. “Like the ones who use these special rooms the most are quite clearly the people from the cathedral. They come to such a grand establishment, eat such good meat and drink such delicious booze. If they just had brown bread and cheap ale, then they could share whatever they had left over with the poor. That is the truth, but the important people from the Church would never do such a thing,” she said quietly. “That’s why we can’t have them get any more stuck-up than they already are. But on the other hand, we’ve racked our brains to figure out what we should do about the situation now, since we can’t have them lose to the Kingdom, either.” Eve paused there to sigh deeply. “Though it’ll bring us riches, we don’t actually want to cross this dangerous bridge in the first place. But the scales are being tipped too far in one direction, and they’re teetering back and forth. The parties concerned with

the Kingdom and the Church are lost. That's because the weights on the scales themselves don't have the power to stop them from teetering. They're too busy keeping themselves from falling off the scales, at least until they go completely to one side. That's why us merchants have to stop them from leaning. Even if they call us bats, even if they view us as traitors, we're the only ones helping both camps; this is the only way to preserve order in the world."

Their gazes on Col were clearly pressuring him.

There was no way he did not know what they meant.

That was because—

"The one who disrupted the balance of the scales was none other than you, Your Eminence."

There was nothing he could say to argue against Arugo. Hyland had also pointed out the same. The Kingdom and Church had been at a standstill these past few years, so while one could lament it as a stagnation of the reform, one could also call it a stable condition.

Col had thought reforming the Church would be an unconditionally wonderful thing. But what if what he was doing was ignorant and naive, and all he was doing instead was planting the seeds of chaos throughout the world?

"Well, this is a bit hard to say, but..."

"You are responsible for giving this unstable situation stability."

That was an adult scolding him.

Regret that felt a lot like embarrassment gnawed at his heart.

Sharon and the others had a compelling reason to fight against the Church. Even the merchants, who were partaking in dubious affairs, had one.

Then, what about Col himself? Did justice really exist on his path of ideals that he sang about? Were his ideals only because he simply knew nothing of the real world?

Just as it felt as though his legs would give way underneath him, Aurelius smiled.

“But luckily, the name of the Twilight Cardinal holds great power right now.”

“What?”

“With your help, I believe that keeping the balance of the scales of the Church and the Kingdom and restoring stability would not be as difficult as it seems.”

“You think so?”

Col unconsciously felt saved by the man’s kind expression.

“Why do you think I came to you, Col?”

Eve gave a troubled smile.

Ever since he was little, she had always been kind to him.

“When I heard that several people trying to disrupt the balance between the Kingdom and the Church appeared, I was surprised to learn it was you...But I get it: If you weren’t aware of what you were doing, then I understand.” Eve’s kind, wry smile was the one he’d seen when he was a child. “Now that I know you’re not scheming, and you’re pulling outrageous acts out of sincerity, I’m relieved, and I also understand. But that sincerity of yours will backfire on you. Well, what am I to do? There’s no universal tool, and that applies to both the Church’s good and bad,” she said, leaning forward over the table. “Col. If the Church attacked now, the Kingdom would be at a disadvantage. But if we can work together, it is entirely possible that we can get the situation under control. We’ll support the foundation of the Kingdom with goods and information, people will come together here because of your presence, and then we can cooperate with our allies on the mainland. Then the Church will likely see that they won’t have a chance at winning the war. Well, due to the difference in supply, it would be impossible for the Kingdom to win just like that, and we don’t want that, either. But when both sides realize that neither has a winning move, the war scare will quickly calm down, and we can complete our goal of preserving order. And of course”—Eve smiled a big, playful smile—“we’ll make plenty of money. We’re merchants, after all.”

“And then everything will come to a nice conclusion.”

“We were astonished, too, when Lady Eve brought this up to us.”

“And it feels good for us knowing that we can outwit the Church. They have let us down quite a lot until now.”

“We have been conducting trade in this country for many years, and it now feels like our market has widened. How could we just throw that away overnight?”

All the merchants on either side of her spoke in turn.

Were they greedy merchants, trying to confuse him with a dubious plot in order to make money?

No.

They were simply thinking of the world in their own way, and they still sought out the road that would bring them the most money. He could not blame them for that.

“How about it, Col? I’d like you to convince Lord Hyland and report to the king yourself. And then we will be able to bring in all our specialty goods to this country straightaway. And while we’re at it, we’ll also be able to cover for you in your weaknesses.”

Arugo, Aurelius, and Matteo all gave confident smiles along with Eve.

They would be able to calm the chaos Col was bringing about.

“Then, here’s proof of our promise.”

Eve then extended her hand. Merchants were creatures of trust, and he had seen how important handshakes were on his travels with Lawrence. Eve and the merchants were serious.

Trust had to be returned with trust. He had come to learn very well how weak he was, and if she and the others were going to help him with that, that would surely be reliable.

He looked at her extended hand, then raised his gaze. Eve was smiling gently at him.

He had no choice but to wipe the sweat off his palm and extend his own hand.

It happened just as he was about to do that.

“Ah!”

There came the sound of porcelain shattering, along with a cry.

He looked to his side, and there was a huge puddle of spilled juice, which was quickly approaching the pure-white robe Myuri wore.

“Ah, oh no, Brother!”

Myuri grew agitated at the sudden event; she wore bright, blindingly white clothes borrowed from Hyland, which were terribly expensive. In a flurry, he reached for his linen on the table to try and wipe it, but grape stains did not easily come out.

“Wh-what should I do, Brother? These aren’t mine...”

Myuri was on the verge of tears, and Col almost wanted to tell her that this was not like her at such an important time as this. He felt bad for asking it of Eve, but he lifted his head to see if they could at least call someone for stain removal, but he noticed Eve’s gaze on Myuri.

He reflexively looked back to Myuri, and she was glaring with such intensity at Eve he thought she might even reveal her fangs, despite how she had just been on the verge of crying only a few seconds ago.

What made him think it was a daydream was that when he looked back and forth between them in surprise, their expressions had returned to normal.

But his eyes had not tricked him.

The two beasts had been exchanging looks.

“*Sniff*...Brother, we need to wash these clothes quickly...,” the little silver wolf said, deflated.

His brain could barely catch up, and his mouth hardly worked.

“Er, uh...”

He glanced over at Eve again, and she had retracted her hand and was now leaning back in her chair, somewhat in a huff.

“Instead of getting a stain remover here, you should go back to the manor.

Call the carriage,” Eve said to the towering man who was both her butler and bodyguard, and with elegant movements that hardly matched his massive stature, he made his way to the door. And as Eve sipped her wine, Arugo and the other merchants turned to look at her, as though confirming her decision.

When he thought about that in conjunction with how she glared at Myuri, then perhaps they had laid a trap for him and were trying to catch him.

He did not know the truth, but that was the conclusion that Myuri had come to, at the very least, and had intentionally spilled her juice.

“I’ve come to retrieve you.”

The driver appeared in the doorway, his eyes widening when he saw how Myuri looked.

As Col helped up Myuri, who was worried about her clothes, and started getting ready to go as though they were fleeing, Eve spoke.

“Col. Without our help, the Kingdom will be unable to escape from a remarkably disadvantageous situation. And our goal is to preserve order. Don’t you love peace?”

Unsure of how to respond, Col simply nodded vaguely, bowed his head briefly, and they left the room.

As they went down the stairs, other patrons saw how outrageously dirty Myuri’s clothes were and were surprised, and some laughed, but Col was in no state of mind to care. After a distance that felt four times longer than when they’d come, they finally reached the outside of the shop, and they climbed into the carriage. The door shut, the whip cracked, and just as the wheels started to clatter along the flagstone, blood finally started circulating above his shoulders.

When Col exhaled the breath he had been holding in his throat, Myuri, who sat next to him, kicked at his feet.

“Brother, you idiot.”

The girl’s clothes were covered in grape juice stains, but it went without saying who the biggest idiot was.

“I’m sorry...But do you mean that Miss Eve and the others were trying to trick

us?”

He did not think that Eve was lying at all. It was also true that at the rate things were progressing, the Kingdom would be at a disadvantage. He had no idea if there were any burst seams in the story at all.

And then, surprisingly, Myuri shook her head.

“Uh-uh. I don’t know if they were trying to trick you, and I don’t know if that fox was lying at all. Mother might’ve been able to tell, but...I think we’ll have to ask Blondie and do some checks on that. I think it was all true, though.”

“Then...why?”

Myuri pinched her robe, perhaps because it was sticky, and started flapping it like a bored little girl as she spoke.

“The second they recognized they’d tripped you up and unsettled you, they started coaxing you and acting really nice to you. I had to stop it when they started using those stereotypical tricks.”

“Stereo...typical?”

Col was shocked, but Myuri just shrugged.

“Mother always uses tricks like that on Father, so I could tell right away. They deal a punch to put you in a flurry, but then they suddenly act all nice and catch you.”

When she said that, he thought over the conversation he’d just had.

When he found himself reeling from how correct what Eve and the others pointed out was, he was not pressured for failing but instead was honestly relieved when they showed him there was a way to recuperate. He felt as though they were on his side.

“It was so obvious that last handshake was going to just tie you up, Brother. You’re too honest, and you’d do anything you could to keep any promises you make, right?”

He saw it easily. Had he taken Eve’s hand, he surely would have tried to influence Hyland on Eve’s behalf, and if that did not go as intended, then he would have felt a pang of conscience for Eve and the others. The reason why

he'd thought he should take her hand in the first place was because he believed she trusted him and that he should live up to her trust.

But if that was just a part of the calculation...

"You realized right away, didn't you?"

This girl had inherited the blood of Holo the wisewolf and the astute merchant Lawrence. On the one hand, he admired her keen insight, but he also winced at how pitiful he was. And it was also true that he had brought instability between the Kingdom and the Church, and it was certain he had been totally unaware of it.

He wanted to bury his face in his hands, but his hand was suddenly grasped by Myuri's.

"Do you even have time to be worried about stuff, Brother?"

"I—"

"Were you even listening to what they were saying?"

"What did they say?" he asked in return, and Myuri gave a deep sigh and pouted.

"They said, you are super-popular in the Kingdom, and that if they made progress while ignoring you, they could still probably easily turn it around afterward, so please be their friend."

"..."

He stared at Myuri in surprise, and she stared back hard at him. Her serious gaze overpowered him, and he had to think on his conversation with Eve and the merchants.

"..."

They had certainly said it would not be hard to calm the teetering scales with his name. If he interpreted that in the most convenient way, as there was no need for flattery on their part after coming all this way, then he felt like Myuri was right.

And if his existence was that inconsequential, then it was certainly odd.

Why had Eve brought this plan to them and not directly to the king?

“If they were going to trick you and use you, then there has to be more to it. They probably have a weakness where they can’t make you too mad. One even bigger than not making Mother angry.”

Even Myuri, who was the most selfish girl in all of Nyohhira, only ever obeyed her mother, Holo.

“They came up with this plan to make bank, but it can’t go any further, so I think they’re trying to make up for it with you. That fox is a famous merchant, right? Then she could’ve just gone straight to the king in the first place. Why’d she come to you?”

His thoughts lined up with hers.

There had to be something there.

“Well, the fox’s only miscalculation is that you have a wolf at your side. And what just happened felt less like a trick and more like a test for me.”

Myuri hummed, as though proud of properly making a mess of the whole thing, but then frowned when she noticed how dull his responses were.

“Are you still upset? You do like that fox, don’t you?”

Myuri pushed closer, but that, at least, he could deny.

“N-not at all. But...I was just so cleanly won over, I...”

Myuri then sighed deeply and sat back.

“True, but you’re you. You’re not Uncle Luward. What else are you gonna do?”

Luward was the valiant captain of a mercenary company. Col could give it his all and still never be like him.

“Uncle Luward would’ve sniffed out the fox’s motives right away, improvised, changed his behavior, and argued back, sure. Or maybe he would’ve drawn his sword to slice the table in half.”

Myuri pretended to swing a sword with both her hands, looking entirely like a tomboy enamored with hero stories, but Col really could imagine Luward

getting in a scuffle.

“But if I try to imagine you doing that, Brother, it doesn’t feel right.”

She suddenly dropped her hands, and her small shoulders shrugged in a grown-up manner.

And then she immediately looked at him with a sincere expression.

“If that’s who you were, I feel like I wouldn’t have been able to believe the promise you made to me.”

“What?”

“The promise that you would be my only friend.”

Col had vowed to Myuri that even if the world shunned her for being nonhuman, he would still be her only friend.

“Uncle Luward might make a promise like that, but...he looks exactly like the kind of person to do that. But you always get so worked up about all the little things and nothing you do is ever clear-cut, and you still honestly made the promise. That totally changes the meaning of it.”

Despite what she said being a little too harsh, Myuri’s expression was gentle and happy.

“What was it you called that? Stubborn? Earnest? You know, the one that makes you sound stupid...”

“...Simple.”

When he said that, Myuri blinked several times and then grinned.

“That one. It really suits you.”

There was both a positive and negative meaning to that word, and she was talking about both.

“And I love you the way you are, Brother.”

Without a hint of embarrassment, she expressed her affection clearly to him.

“I guess I do kind of want you to learn a little from Uncle Luward, but...you’re still you at the end of the day. So even when it seems like foxes like that might

corner you in an argument, you don't have to get upset over every little thing." Her beautifully shaped red eyes shone dauntlessly. "It's my job to fight things like that. That means you absolutely need me."

Myuri was not a weak little girl who always needed Col to protect her.

She was a wolf with the blood of a wisewolf.

"Then, what's my job?" Col asked, and Myuri planted her face right on his shoulder.

"You're supposed to hug me."

"..."

While her ears and tail were not out, her body language was telling him to do it quickly. It was partially a joke, but it was also demonstrating the truth.

Eve had cornered him and was abusing the name of the Twilight Cardinal, who looked like he was not truly thinking about the consequences of his actions and was likely walking around alone. But that meant Myuri noticed it, because being an idiot was not necessarily always a bad thing.

There were things he could do and things people would believe in him for because he was simple.

Eve had also called him sincere.

If God brought everyone into this world with a role in mind, then he had to fully do his part. And if he was to believe that his role was reforming the Church, then he certainly did not have any time to be upset.

Eve's plan might have a huge effect on the future relationship between the Kingdom and the Church, and the relationship between the Kingdom and the Church would affect the order of the world. That order would pass throughout the world, and people like Sharon, who had been caught up in the Church's evil practices, could also use it. He was the gear that sat in the key point of the mechanism.

But most important of all, the girl named Myuri was looking straight at him as she always had.

How could he walk the path of a man of the cloth without living up to her

expectations?

“Very well. Myuri?”

“Yeah?”

She stretched her neck, her face nearing his.

“We will have to investigate Miss Eve’s plan as thoroughly as possible, and since I had no idea of it, I will have to reconsider how this will affect the world.”

“Oh, uh, huh?”

“But where should we start first...? I think we need to talk to Miss Sharon and then send letters to Mister Hilde and Mister Lawrence...”

As Col thought as hard as he could, Myuri stuck her face in front of his and headbutted him.

“?! ”

“Brother, you idiot!”

She huffed and looked away.

He was lost for a moment and then finally remembered that she had asked him to hug her. She had seen through Eve’s psychological warfare to save him and she’d cheered him up when he was down, so he had to thank her. He could at least do that now—so he reached out to put his arms around her, and even though Myuri still pouted, she leaned into him with an affected sigh.

But then he suddenly stopped.

“Oh, I would only dirty these clothes, wouldn’t I?”

The whole front of Myuri’s outfit was a beautiful grape purple. Col was also wearing clothes borrowed from Hyland, so he could not let them get dirty. He had unconsciously frozen because of that, but he noticed Myuri’s cheeks were puffed as she glared at him.

“Oh...”

“Whatever!”

She completely blew up.

It was around then that the carriage arrived at Hyland's manor, and Hyland, eagerly waiting for them, hurriedly rushed over to greet them in a way that did not suit a noble.

"That was quick. How did things end up—?"

Just as she started to speak, she saw how the two looked when they alighted the carriage, and her eyes bulged.

"I thought it was strange that none of them was thinking about betraying the Church, but to think that all of them already were!"

While Myuri had gone to change her clothes, Col gave a rough outline of what had happened and Hyland shook her head in amazement.

"If it's true, then their plan does seem a little more realistic, but...you still find something suspicious about it, do you?"

"Myuri pointed this out as well, but it sounds like there is a reason that Miss Eve has to have us on her side. Myuri noticed that if she had confidence in her plan, it would have been easier to go straight to the king himself."

"You're right...Perhaps she was afraid of it being too preposterous, just like she said..."

After a moment of dropping her head as though in deep thought, Hyland continued.

"If there's a possibility for it, then maybe insurance. They are betraying the Church, so they have to have thought of what would happen if they were exposed. So perhaps you could say getting you on their side would be the very least they could do to be ready. With you on their side, that means the people of the Kingdom are on their side, at least. Or..." Hyland paused and mischievously curled her right hand like an animal's claw. "They get a good grip on you to use you when the time calls for it."

Col did not have to think very hard to imagine how they would use him.

"...They would hand me over to the Church in order to make up for the crime of betraying them."

They knew they were about to cross a very dangerous bridge, and Myuri had

said that there was a reason Eve and the others could not continue any further with their plan.

If that reason was the guarantee of a lifeline, then that was more than a good enough reason to try and pull in the Twilight Cardinal to their side.

“It might not be like the exchanging of heads from the wars of old, but if you were to surrender to the Church, then it might be easier for them to gather the distant feelings of the general public. It’s not a terrible value to use you for that. Oh yes...That’s very possible. You want to be a priest, don’t you?”

“...So you mean I would not be forcibly sold over to the Church but that I also have advantages, correct?”

“And also, what would happen if my own person was ensured?”

Hyland’s? Col thought, and when he considered what sort of position Hyland might be in at that time, a bitter taste spread through his mouth.

“I would be made to work in exchange for your life, wouldn’t I?” he asked.

Just as Hyland chuckled, as though something about it was funny, the door opened and Myuri came in. She was wearing her normal clothes that she had been wearing from Nyohhira.

“Even these clothes feel super stiff after wearing such a nice outfit like that...,” Myuri grumbled and sat in the chair beside Col. “Were you guys talking about fun stuff?”

“Not at all.”

“We were talking about a situation in which I was captured and your brother had to come and save me.”

“Oh yeah, that’s no fun.”

“Myuri!”

Hyland’s shoulders shook as she laughed, and Myuri only looked away when Col scolded her. She still seemed to be angry about what happened in the carriage.

After a good laugh, Hyland tapped the table with her finger.

“But position-wise, we are at a disadvantage here. Especially if war was to break out.”

“And...it’s likely that will happen, isn’t it?”

He had felt like Eve was confident it would.

Hyland sighed weakly.

“Typically, the excuse of an outbreak of war is a defensive one. For us, we don’t want to have a war, but we don’t have a choice. In that respect, the aggression of the riled tax collectors is a good enough reason for it.”

And when war broke out, they had to wholly accept Eve’s plan in order to procure supplies. There were only so many options they could take.

“If we don’t like the thought of getting on board with Eve and company’s intentions, then we need to also consider suppressing the actions of the tax collectors. But I’m unsure if we can persuade them with words to stop.”

Sharon’s hate was real.

And Myuri, who had been looking away in a huff, turned to Col with surprise.

It was almost as though she was asking if he was planning on getting in Sharon’s way.

“Eve and the merchants are talking on the presupposition that war will start because the Church is likely showing indications that it will. In that case, if we don’t accept what they say, then that means we will have to conduct war with the Church without any of the traders. We stand absolutely no chance of winning. We would need to change our direction to removing the spark that would lead to war.”

“But I’m not sure if we can convince...”

Hyland also apparently seemed to know of Sharon’s personality, so she nodded and responded.

“If the time calls for it, then I will suggest to the king that he cancel the tax-collecting permits themselves.”

Drifters like Sharon could publicly attack the cathedral because they had tax-

collecting rights based in royal authority.

Of course, there were times they were used in a bad way.

The king could cancel the collection rights at his own discretion, and then Sharon and the others would immediately lose their grounds to fight against the Church.

“You can’t!” Myuri cried, standing with such vigor that her chair fell over. “That would just mean withdrawing against the Church, right?! You can’t do that!”

Col was surprised to see how determined she was.

As he wondered if she really empathized that much with Sharon’s story, Hyland, who had spent all her time doting on Myuri, turned to her with a sharp gaze.

“We cannot expose the entirety of the country to danger due to our own personal sentiment.”

That was not the friendly Hyland speaking but a young lord of the Hyland house.

As Myuri stood there gnashing her teeth, unable to continue, Col held out his hand.

“Myuri, calm down.”

“But, Brother!”

“Then, do you think we should go along with Eve’s plan?”

He interpreted that as a teasing question as well, but it was likely because that was how much Hyland recognized Myuri as an equal.

“...”

Unable to answer, Myuri weakly plopped back into her chair.

Hyland watched Myuri with a sad expression. She, too, was pained by Sharon’s story. Hyland’s morals would never allow her to compromise with an organization practicing deeds that could only be called cruel.

However, it was unclear if they could trust Eve, and even if they could, they

had to consider the mystery element that was Heir Klevend once war broke out.

From the position of Hyland and the king and all the heirs above her, pouring all their energy into avoiding war would keep an overwhelming number of things safer. That meant that even the most humiliating of compromises would be much preferable to losing the war and their chances of recovery.

Hyland sighed, then spoke.

“The tax collectors would probably get stubborn; they don’t want to lose their foundation, either. It’s likely they’ll accept a temporary pullout. If we ask them to retreat for a brief moment, then it’s possible that tensions with the Church would ease. In that case, they could keep their rights to collect taxes.”

Hyland was creating a road by placing one stone at a time. It was realistic, sensible, and reasonable.

But when Col saw how smooth her reasoning was, he suddenly felt something off that he just could not push away.

That was how calm Eve and the others were at the Golden Fern, and how Hyland acted when she cleanly laid out the next steps without a moment’s hesitation did not match up.

“Heir Hyland, may I?”

“What is it?”

He mentally held the odd feeling in his hands again. He checked its form and its size and converted it into words.

“I wonder if Miss Eve and the others were entirely confident they would have us on board with their explanation at the Golden Fern.”

Hyland blinked. Myuri, beside him, also made a quizzical face.

“...They weren’t?”

After she said that, Hyland turned her gaze to Myuri because she was roughly explaining what they talked about at the meeting.

“...But didn’t they actually win you over, Brother?”

There was no doubt that Col would have completely fallen for the trap

without Myuri. It would have been only a few moments later that the door would have closed behind him and a collar placed around his neck. He had no excuse for that.

But that was why something felt so off to him.

“Someone as great as Miss Eve let her prey escape from a trap right before her eyes. I feel like she would be more persistent, yet we came back here like it was nothing.”

And Hyland immediately came up with a countermeasure accepting that would happen.

It was much too simple and much too logical.

“Don’t you think...it’s because they knew that I’d stationed people in the area? And if you ended up in a trap, we would have to think about retaliation as well.”

That might have been true, but he had a feeling they were misunderstanding Eve on a more fundamental level. There had to be something that would explain exactly why Eve and the others were not too bothered about convincing him right then and there and why they did not mind at all that they managed to escape.

Perhaps they had absolute confidence in their own plan, for example.

Perhaps they were convinced that the result would be the same, even if they escaped, for example.

For example.

For example...

“No way.”

When he realized the possibility, Col was shocked.

“Col?”

Col lifted his head when he heard Hyland’s anxious tone. He knew very well how capable she was. She was just as virtuous. He then looked to Myuri beside him. The rambunctious Myuri had been teaching him a terrible lesson of how

easily the most honest people were controlled.

So perhaps Eve easily saw through them because of how logical Hyland's idea was?

Eve and the others had a way to make their plans a certainty.

"What would you do if we couldn't douse the spark of war at this point?"

"What do you..." *...mean?* was the rest of Hyland's question, but she could not finish, and the blood drained from her face.

The thing that was worrying her in the first place was why the merchants, who would never hesitate to betray all those around them for a fat profit, were coming together for the Church.

Merchants would do anything they could to get money.

In that case, they should be looking at it like this:

"Miss Eve and the others are probably thinking that instead of making plans on the premise of a war that may or may not happen, all they needed to do was make that uncertain war into a certainty. Perhaps they decided they needed to mix themselves in with the tax collectors' underlings."

Because if war did break out, then the desperate Kingdom would have no choice but to rely on Eve, even without having to convince Hyland.

And since they would be without any other options, Eve and the others would hold the initiative for negotiations.

This could be the only reason why they were not angry when Myuri snatched up her prey out of nowhere just before the maw of the trap in the Golden Fern closed. They were confident their escaped prey would just come right back to them.

That was exactly who Eve Bolan was.

"...Starting a war for money, huh?" Hyland said, astonished.

"When I first met her, she completely obstructed a river so no other ships could carry in furs, with the aim of monopolizing the fur trade. I heard she would have been hung if she was found out."

As intelligent as she was, Hyland was a noble and, to put it simply, had a good upbringing.

Her face tensed when she heard of Eve's past, which could be called nothing but savage.

"I wonder if the chicken knows she's got bugs in her camp."

When Myuri said that, Col swallowed hard.

"Miss Sharon and the others' goal is to drag the priests out from the cathedral. It might be possible they've realized they have intruders on the inside, but..."

"They might think of it as a perfect opportunity."

He did not want to think that Sharon's ideology was that nihilistic, but it was not impossible.

"Then, they won't delay any longer, will they?"

Col had never heard Hyland's voice quaver like that before.

"Actually, now that they've disclosed what they have in their hand, I doubt they'll leave it for later. Of course...that is if my thoughts are correct, however..."

He had proposed the idea, but it was just a supposition, and he had no proof for it. When he voiced his reservations, Myuri gave him a cool look, and Hyland gawked at him.

"Brother."

"Y-yes?"

"Sit up straight. Arch your shoulders."

"What?"

He was bewildered by Myuri's words, and Hyland stiffened, smiling slightly at him.

"You're a strange one. You're daring but delicate."

He felt as though Eve had said the same thing, but he was sure she had not

been complimenting him.

“Either way, I cannot push your theory aside like nonsense. Instead, from how things are developing, I think you might be right.”

“Yeah,” Myuri said, standing. “Then, what are we gonna do? I hate the Church. I sympathize with the chicken...her. I don’t want to get in her way. But really don’t wanna get on board the bad fox’s plan.”

Myuri was talking about the whole thing entirely as though it was about her preferences, but even thinking about it logically, the conclusion was mostly the same.

“If there are merchant puppets scattered throughout the association, then doing something about the tax collection permits would not change anything. And how would we fish out those working for the traders? It can’t just be one person, and it’s not very realistic to capture all of them before someone does something to enrage the Church and push them over the edge to decide to start a war.”

Sharon and the others were not the villains in this story, no. They had a good reason to be angry and were acting on it. Treating them like criminals would not be right.

Think, Col desperately told himself. The worst-possible scenario had not happened yet, and they still had the possibility to do something about it.

And speaking of possibilities, there was one way.

“This might just be a theory, but...”

“I don’t care. Let me hear it.”

Col licked his lips, formed his question, then spoke.

“Why don’t we just have the tax collectors and the city cathedral come to a reconciliation?”

“...What?”

Hyland looked at him in astonishment.

But he was not afraid.

“With the way things are now, I think no matter how many tax collectors we end up catching, it would be a waste of time. Even if we threw them all in jail, they could equip someone else who sympathizes with them and attack the cathedral as much as they like. From the outside, the Kingdom’s misconduct seems like a good enough reason for the Church to start a war with them.”

“I...”

“But it’s a different story if we can get them to reconcile with the cathedral. Rausbourne is a huge city with a large diocese, and I imagine they have quite the influence. The relationship between the Rausbourne cathedral and the Kingdom will set an example for the future. If that happens, then the tax collectors might officially lay down their arms, and if the cathedral is happy with that, then any other rabble-rousers who might try and attack the cathedral in the future would be harder to use to justify a war with, is that correct? And with an official reconciliation, then the Kingdom would take initiative to protect the cathedral.”

Hyland slowly thought over his words, then nodded, as though swallowing them.

“You’re right, but there’s a problem. The tax collectors reconciling with the cathedral is just a development of the reform, isn’t it? Would that not just instead cause the papal office on the mainland to stiffen their attitude? It feels like your plan is just the image of a snake eating its own tail...”

Col shook his head, cringing at how bad his own explanation was.

“Er, not exactly. There would be reconciliation, but on the surface, we would have the tax collectors step down.”

“Step down? The tax collectors? But that’s—”

Impossible should have been the next word to follow, but Col stared hard at Hyland.

“Miss Sharon and the others might be tax collectors, but their goal is not money.”

In that case, there was only one possibility left.

“If we could unofficially achieve reconciliation with the priests, then I think that perhaps Miss Sharon and the others won’t mind so much about how it looks on the surface.”

“Oh right!” Myuri said, clapping her hands together. “That’s why that nasty fox was trying to get you on her side!”

“I see! We certainly should remember what the Twilight Cardinal has done. You actually did open the doors of the cathedral in Desarev!”

Eve was plotting to get rich on a war she was counting as a given, so what she was most cautious about was an easing of tension between the Kingdom and the Church.

The one who could act as a mediator between the two would only get in the way of her plans, which would give her a reason to be wary of him.

Of course, since Col knew the facts, he saw this as a completely different situation to the one in Desarev, and frankly, he was not confident that he could bring about a reconciliation that would satisfy Sharon and the tax collectors.

But that was the only thing he could do, and if that was their course for solving this, then they had no choice but to do it.

And not only that, but this theory cleanly explained Eve’s actions as well.

To put it simply, one could also say that Eve thought reconciliation was possible.

“Then, um?”

There, Myuri made a clueless noise.

“Right. I don’t see our next step. The cathedral is literally unapproachable. It would be hard to get in contact with them in the first place, so what will you do? You forcing your way over to knock on their door could be enough to light the fire on its own.”

Col could see what the next step was.

“There is someone who sympathizes with Miss Sharon but who also supports the cathedral’s side.”

And that person even looked upon Col favorably.

It was Clark.

“Heir Hyland.” Col looked straight at Hyland and spoke. “I believe we might be able to avoid war without relying on Miss Eve’s intentions.”

Next, he turned to Myuri.

“And without getting in Miss Sharon’s way.”

Myuri’s face immediately lit up, and she nodded.

CHAPTER FOUR



CHAPTER FOUR

Because of who Sharon was, Col could easily imagine her being repulsed if they brought their plan to her directly. Not only that, but she had a lot of people on her side. To show any cowardice in her position could be perceived as a betrayal to all those siding with her.

That might not necessarily be the case, however, if the cathedral showed they were in a position to accept talks.

And while his situation was the same in relation to the cathedral, it was Clark who could tie the two together.

“But...to think things would turn out like this.”

Col and Myuri were on their way to see Clark, crawling on all fours in the darkness.

Since they could not predict what Eve and the others were going to do, they needed to get things rolling as quickly as possible, so they decided to head straight for Clark, but there was a problem. There were people keeping watch over the manor that Hyland was borrowing.

They were probably working for Eve. If word got out that the two had gone to see Clark, they could figure out what they were up to and possibly cut them off from him, even if that meant putting him directly in danger.

What Col suggested was a disguise or to escape by hiding in the cargo of the merchant carts as they came and went.

But Myuri flatly rejected both ideas, and what she instead suggested put them in this situation.

“Myuri...Do you know where you’re going?”

Since they had passed through countless junctions, and the paths themselves bent and curved, Col’s sense of direction had long since been rendered useless.

A faint ray of sunlight occasionally peeked through the ceiling, allowing him to make out Myuri's fluffy silver tail as she crawled ahead of him. Though he knew that if Myuri, who had her ears and tail out, was using her powers as a wolf, then they would not get lost, he was still uneasy.

They were currently in the remnants of a sewage system, left behind by Rausbourne's long history.

"Almost there."

Soon after she replied with that, Myuri suddenly stopped and stuck her nose into that fluffy tail of hers.

"It's around here...What's wrong, Brother?"

Col sneezed and responded, "It's nothing."

"Ummm...Oh, so there is a board in this spot. Oof," Myuri said as she raised her back to the ceiling, as though she was going to carry it, and moved it to the side.

She then stuck her head outside and looked around, then motioned for Col to follow.

"We're here, Brother."

Myuri lightly hopped into the sunlight and Col followed, sticking his head out of the hole, and there he saw a household garden, overflowing with so many colors, it almost hurt his eyes.

"This is incredible. Look at all the flowers they have at this season."

"I think I would've gotten lost if it wasn't for this smell."

Col crawled out beside Myuri, who was brushing away at her knees and untucking her traveler's cloak, then looked back down at the darkness from which they traversed. It was a holdover from an old era, long before the city was as densely populated as it was now, a waterway that took water from the rivers to feed the nobles' massive gardens.

When several of the massive plots for the manors went on sale, which came with the development of the city, it seemed to be too much effort to fill the sewers, so they left them as is, but that was how nobles were. They seemed to

have let them be for a turbulent situation, and they connected the manors, covered in wooden boards here and there. It also seemed as though there was regular cleaning of the remains themselves, since there were not even any cobwebs to be seen.

“Why did you know about this passageway?”

It was not Hyland but Myuri who said they should go see Clark through this passage. Hyland did not seem to know about it, either.

Myuri moved the board back with her foot, then stomped it in, fixing it in place, then shrugged.

“It’s because you always hear about underground passageways in stories about big cities. And in the courtyard, there was like, this stone pathway thing that suddenly went under the building, so I thought that might be it. And when I was putting my juice-stained clothes away, I asked one of the people from the manor.”

Col had noticed she came back a little late, and that was why. She had been just as filled with curiosity when they went out into town, but she truly was seeing a world totally different from what he saw.

“I didn’t think it’d be useful right away, though. Oh, and I heard Mother and Father used one like it once, too. That’s also what made me notice it.”

Now that she mentioned it, Col felt like he had heard that story from them before.

“Our adventures will be just as great as theirs!”

He was not sure what sort of competition this was supposed to be, but it was true that she had been a great help.

“It doesn’t seem like anyone is staying in this manor at the moment, but we should go before anyone finds us.”

“Someone probably comes by to tend the garden and stuff, yeah. Um, this way.”

Myuri looked around, straining her wolf ears, then walked off toward the direction of the sun. They were not headed for the big road where carriages

went by but toward the inside of the residential blocks.

They were in the garden of a large manor, but it did not seem to be of as high a standing as the one Hyland was borrowing, since the gate cut into the wooden fence had only a simple dead bolt on it.

Myuri pressed her ear against the gate to see if she could hear anything, then raised the bolt and opened the gate. Then, there was a small alleyway, much like the one that Sharon led them through on their way to the orphanage.

“Playing tag down here could be a lot of fun,” Myuri said leisurely, and he understood why. The alley was winding, rolling; it was either an un-floored part of someone’s house or a shared washing space, as an ambiguous lived-in atmosphere continued along down the alley.

This was a path that travelers would never find if they stuck only to the big avenues.

“Lead the way.”

“Got it.”

Myuri wore a cloak over her regular clothes, and her wolf ears proudly twitched beneath the hood. The luxurious clothes they borrowed from Hyland also suited her, but Col personally liked her popular attire better.

It was an odd time of day, a little too late for the afternoon but a little too early for evening, so the alley was quiet and empty, and Myuri confidently jogged down it. Col followed the glimpses of the silver tail he saw beneath the robe, in his chest pocket a letter from Hyland detailing their intentions to denounce Eve’s plan and a proposal for peace between the Kingdom and the Church.

In addition to the letter, they planned to persuade Clark to stand between Sharon and the cathedral.

Now was not the time for Col to be modest about the name of the Twilight Cardinal. He could be as humble as he wanted, but there were people out there in the world who wanted to use his name and people who recognized his odd authority.

If he was going to be used and thrown around by anyone, he should at least use it for the path he believed in.

“Brother.”

Just as he was reaffirming his decision, Myuri stopped and turned around.

Behind her was a familiar building.

It was the orphanage Sharon owned.

Col was worried that Clark might be away, but that turned out to be a groundless fear.

He knocked on the door several times, and Clark’s face appeared through the peep window.

“My, my...”

The door opened for him right away, but Clark casually turned his gaze to the space behind them.

“Is it just the two of you?”

“We are here on matters that must be kept from Miss Sharon.”

Clark’s face tensed when he realized they were not there to relax.

“Come in, then.”

He let them in and closed the door behind them.

“Do you mind if we have a word with you?”

“No...I don’t mind. All the noisy boys are out busying themselves at the neighborhood workshop right now.”

No work, no dinner. Col remembered living in an institute like this a long time ago.

He noticed how Clark’s hands were dirtied from ink; he must transcribe while the kids are out.

“Please come in. We still have plenty of sun at this time of day, so it’s warm.”

Clark invited them in and they walked down the hall, and in one of the rooms along the way, little girls were spinning thread into yarn. Off to the side were

very young children, who were not old enough to work, napping leisurely.

This sight alone made things seem peaceful, but it was not necessarily certain the orphanage would safely stay in business until these children were of an age where they could sufficiently take care of themselves.

It was depressing to know they had no blood relatives to rely on if things got bad.

“Please take a seat.”

They came to a room facing the courtyard, where there were chairs and a table where Clark had apparently been doing his work, relying on the light of the sun.

Col and Myuri sat beside each other in the rickety chairs, and Clark began speaking in a rather nervous manner.

“The most I can offer you is some cooled boiled water...”

“I don’t mind,” Col responded, then got straight to the point. “We actually came to talk to you about the cathedral.”

Still standing, Clark’s eyes widened for a moment.

The tension in his body then dissipated and he sighed, as though he’d struck upon an idea.

“The way you broached the subject and how you mentioned it needs to be kept from Miss Sharon says to me that this will not be a peaceful topic.”

Clark looked out into the courtyard through the open window, then folded his hands together before him like a scolded boy.

“I would like to know if there’s anything I can do to help...”

“Our goal is to have the cathedral and Miss Sharon and the tax collectors reconcile. I was hoping you would be able to pass the message on to a priest at the cathedral.”

Even with all her authority, Hyland was still apparently unable to open the door to the cathedral. They would not even open the outside gates if the Twilight Cardinal, the standard-bearer for Church reform, nonchalantly showed

up.

But if Clark was the one to speak to them, then perhaps Col would be able to convey what he wanted to say.

That was what he had in mind, but Clark's response was curt.

"That's not possible."

"...Passing on a message, you mean? Or—"

"Either."

Despite how short and frank Clark's words were, his gaze was weakly directed at the floor. When Col realized how inconsistent that seemed, Clark closed his eyes and spoke.

"I have a request as well."

He then turned to look straight at Col, and what he said next stunned him.

"I have to ask you to leave this city."

Of course, Col had predicted that he would refuse to pass on the message.

But he had not dreamed of hearing what Clark had just said.

"Please don't ask anything else and leave. And please separate yourself from the trouble with Sharon and the Church."

Clark was a full-fledged priest who received benefices from the Church. The Twilight Cardinal, who was pressuring the Church to reform, was, in a sense, the enemy.

And yet, they came to ask Clark because he had been born in similar circumstances as Sharon, and he was helping operate the orphanage for her. Not only that, he was going against the Church's will by transcribing the common-language translation of the scripture that Col had done and was placing them in chapels throughout the city. It was hard to think that his excitement when they'd first met was an act.

It was too much of a surprise to hear such a man tell them to step back and leave the city that Col did not know how to respond. Clark himself also seemed to be bewildered by the words that had come out of his own mouth, as his eyes

darted left and right and he bit his lip.

There was that odd inconsistency again. The words he spoke were harsh, but he acted like a weak little lamb.

The sigh Col heard from beside him was Myuri's, as though lamenting that there were now two of her meek older brother.

"My brother is on Sharon's side. But we still have to leave?"

Clark looked like he'd had a wound prodded.

"..."

He silently nodded in response.

When Col looked at the other man's expression, he suddenly noticed that all he could see was that his command to leave was not how he truly felt.

"Has the cathedral been threatening you?"

It was uncertain if the cathedral was aware that the Twilight Cardinal was in town, but it would not be out of place if he had been given strict orders to never listen to discourse from anyone who sided with the Kingdom.

There were plenty of children in the orphanage who could be used as hostages.

And Clark shook his head.

"No. They are still hiding behind the stone walls, holding their breath. They're praying things will take care of themselves."

Despite his sad expression, there were sharp thorns to his words. It was similar to the anger that came with exasperation.

"Then, why?"

When Col asked again, Clark shook his head slowly.

The deep breath he took next was his way of collecting something.

"Why do you think Sharon has placed me here?"

There was a clear hint of something akin to hostility in the gaze Clark gave Col.

"Because...you're just like Miss Sharon..."

“Yes. But that is not all. You know what Sharon’s like. She’s so young, and despite being a woman, she’s gathered all the people who have been tossed aside by the Church, organized them, and displayed the genius that eventually made her the vice president of the tax collector association. She would not place someone like me here for that reason alone.”

He spat it out, deprecating himself in a way that even felt like desperation.

Col unconsciously turned to look at Myuri, and she looked at him in bewilderment.

“Sharon thought she could use me, so she left me in charge of managing this orphanage. When the benefices stopped, I was truly left out in the cold, so this was my lifeline. There was also a side of atonement to it, one where I might be able to do at least something about the dirty parts of the Church.” Clark spoke quickly, as though hurling out everything he had kept bottled up. He then took a deep breath and continued. “Sharon placed me here not at all because she felt an affinity for me because of our similar origins but because she needed my position. Just like you.” His face twisted in surrender when he said that. “Sharon was hoping to reconcile with the cathedral at first. And so she placed me here as a liaison just for that.”

Col was both surprised and hopeful when he heard Sharon was thinking about reconciliation.

“In that case, that is all the more reason to help, is it not? I—”

“No, it’s useless,” Clark said, cutting him off.

“...Useless?”

“Yes. Do you know why Sharon has such darkness in her eyes...? At first, she was hopeful for her—no, for our father.”

There suddenly came the sound of a crying child from the hallway behind them. It soon quieted down; the girls spinning the thread probably calmed them down.

When the crying stopped and all became quiet again, Clark continued in a tired tone.

“Sharon and the others have not always been this radical. At first, when she was generously gifted with the rights to tax collection, she realized it was the perfect chance for drifters to reestablish their lives, so she wandered around to help those from similar circumstances and created an association in which they could help one another. It was not for bloody revenge at all.”

There was a side of Sharon that burned with the hatred to drag out the priests from the cathedral, no matter the cost, and string them up by the road, and the other side to her that looked on at the children of the orphanage with kindness.

For whatever reason, those two sides of her ended up splitting.

“But as she worked as a tax collector in the city, she came to learn that several of these ‘uncles’ worked in the cathedral. She used tax collection as her lead to try and talk with them. The cathedral gates had been closed and the high-ranking priests holed up inside, even back then, but she figured they would respond to tax collection, which had the backing of royal authority.”

It was the same logic that Ilenia had.

“But none of the high-ranking priests responded, including the archbishop. If they did, then they would have to acknowledge their own sins.”

Clark’s mouth twisted in irony; Col knew how he felt.

If they did not recognize it existed, then it did not exist—it was the same thing.

That was how the Church had accumulated so many evils.

“But if that was all, I don’t think Sharon and the others would have turned out like they did.”

Clark dropped his shoulders and turned his gaze outside.

The hues of evening were starting to creep into the afternoon sunlight, which illuminated the man’s profile as he reminisced.

“What happened?”

Col prodded him to continue, and Clark closed his eyes, not bothering to turn back to him.

“You happened, Your Eminence.”

He then turned to Col, his tone and gaze completely different from the first time they’d met—they were filled with anger.

“You raising the beacon for reform in Atiph was the cause of all this. The priests remaining in the Kingdom were thrown into confusion and asked for instructions from the papal office on the mainland. The response was to absolutely not compromise. But then, after the commotion in Atiph, there came word that the northern islands, which could be seen as allies of both the Church and the heretics, were starting to work together with the Kingdom. Word of how the archbishop who the papal office had directly dispatched had been chased away and pulled back in dejection was talked about all throughout the city.”

The archbishop was the one who had been on the Ruvik Alliance ship and had tried to get Autumn and company on his side with money. Rausbourne was a port city, so the news had probably reached here through the sailors’ word of mouth.

“By then, an air of unease had enveloped the city, where a lot of merchants from abroad come to stay. The Church will not allow the Kingdom to hold the dominant position at this rate. There is a rumor they will surely start a war sooner or later.”

The powers had to protect their power.

And Col and Hyland sought to reform the Church, which endangered their authority.

“Sharon and the others still saw hope. If the situation got so desperate that war ended up breaking out, then their ‘uncles’ would likely cross over to the mainland in order to avoid being taken prisoner. If that happened, in the end, they might at least listen to what their children had to say.”

People expected goodwill from others because they had the same kindness within them.

Sharon seemed to be naturally realistic and could not ignore other people in trouble.

That was why she hoped for the best.

“And they were betrayed?”

Clark smiled sadly, restlessly clasping his hands together and then separating them.

“The decision the archbishop and company came to was not to set up an opportunity to talk with Sharon and the others but to make the merchants their allies.”

Col recalled the commotion in the harbor, and it had not felt at all like they had mutually approached each other.

“The Kingdom is getting stronger every day, thanks to all you’ve done, and the tax collectors they back have deduced that they should be able to push through to the Church as they are now. Do you understand how shocked Sharon was when the cathedral placed the traders’ association on their side to stand against them head-on? Even though their ‘uncles’ could see war brewing on the horizon, they still refused to bear the brunt of the attack.”

Clark’s accusatory gaze did not so much seem like one of a foolish lamb who had been innocently at the whims of the world but one who blamed himself.

It was clear that when Sharon heard the archbishop’s answer, she came here to the orphanage and suffered before Clark. And perhaps that made him aware of his weakness.

Col knew, too, that prayers were entirely powerless in real-world problems.

But Clark continued to speak, signaling that there was more to it than that.

“But...but Sharon and I were disappointed in them because they’re really not bad people.”

They were not bad people?

As Col found himself bewildered by that, a vexed smile crept into Clark’s expression.

“The priests know I am taking care of children at the orphanage Sharon maintains. It might be a big city, but you can’t really hide anything. But instead of reprimanding me, they went through people to even give donations to keep

the house running. Sharon probably has a faint idea of what's happening, too."

Col's mind was filled with confusion.

The archbishop and company were donating to this orphanage? Even despite how they refused to talk, rejected the notion of fighting themselves, and even got the traders' association on their side in order to strong arm the tax collectors?

While Col did not understand it all, Myuri murmured.

"Real bad people are hard to find."

Clark's eyes widened; then he slowly nodded.

"Right. As Sharon and the others toughened their attitudes and got even more radical, I listened to the thoughts of the high-ranking priests and the archbishops, and I didn't know what to say. They did not put the merchants on their side because they thought Sharon and her friends were getting in the way."

When Col saw Myuri shrug in annoyance, he interjected in spite of himself.

"P-please wait. I do not understand what you're saying to me. According to what I've heard, the cathedral got the merchants on their side and were planning to go ahead with the war with the Kingdom now that they had the advantage. Not only that, but you say that *is* the priests' plan, and they refused a direct confrontation with Miss Sharon and the others. And yet—"

Was it not to antagonize Sharon and the tax collectors?

Col was tormented by something that felt like seasickness, as if he was standing in a swamp and did not know where to place his feet.

Clark flashed a kind smile, as though signaling he understood his confusion.

"It is perplexing, isn't it? I was the same. But when I listened to them, I understood where they were coming from. The priests are not all evil, but of course, they are not all good, either."

After a brief pause, he continued.

"The archbishop and company need to show the papal office that they are

fighting with the Kingdom so they don't lose their position. That being said, they are afraid a real war will evolve from this and that they will have to cross swords with Sharon and the tax collectors. While the Kingdom might be gaining momentum, the power of the Church organization is massive. The priests higher up thought that if they end up going to war, they will, without a doubt, win, even if that isn't in anyone's best interests. What do you think would happen then? The priests, now on the winning side, would be made to burn at the stake the heretics who bared their fangs at the Church."

And who was at the forefront of it all?

Sharon and the tax collectors.

"No parent could hang their own children and let them burn. They are good at their core. They donate to this orphanage—that means they haven't forgotten their sense of guilt. If they are guilty of anything, it's their reluctance to commit to anything and their attachment to their positions. As a result, they've turned into pitiful lost lambs who don't want to do anything in particular, and unluckily for them, they're clever. They have power. So they organized the traders and worked out a plan to put the Kingdom in a disadvantageous position, then prayed the Kingdom would compromise."

What for?

It was obvious.

"It's so they don't have to go to war with the Kingdom, Brother."

So that they would win the war and so Sharon and the others would not be burned at the stake.

If they could lead the Kingdom into compromising by creating an absolutely advantageous position, then they could win without fighting; that was the possibility that Myuri had mentioned straightaway. Most of war was the fighting before the actual exchange of fire, an exchange of bluffs to make the opponent think that fighting would be unproductive for them.

In that regard, the idea of getting the merchants on their side was a brilliant step.

They protected their position on the outside while also making sure that

Sharon and the others were safe.

“But when Sharon and the others heard that, it was instead almost like their last hopes had been severed. They knew they could not separate the priests as truly evil, nor could they expect them to repent for reconciliation. They were lost, unable to forget their anger regarding the very people who had dropped them into misfortune but also unable to confront them, and that lost feeling easily turned into hatred.”

Sharon had said the only way to set them straight was to crush them all at once.

That was what that meant.

Their noncommittal attitude certainly must have been irritating to Sharon and the others. In the end, the priests continued to turn away from their past sins and continued on stringing together flowery words on the surface.

However, after hearing all that, the anger Col felt was not toward the selfishness of the priests but toward Eve and the merchants.

While it was born from a warped conscience and a weak heart, the priests were still making plans to avoid war with the tax collectors. On the other hand, Eve and company were almost sneering at them, trying to use them.

Eve and company were making plans on the presumption that war was already going to be happening, and they were even thinking about starting it themselves. Were they unaware of what the archbishop was planning? Unlikely.

They were trying to turn blood and tears into money.

For a moment, he thought about telling Clark. If he told him that the merchants were using the priests' intentions, then he might relay the message to them.

But then what? The only result he could imagine was that the priests would cut the merchants off and then stiffen up, unable to trust anyone else. The only thing that would happen was that his small sense of justice would be fulfilled. That would just be an inconvenient reality for the merchants, and they would only wish they could have used them more effectively.

Could they leverage that reality to keep Eve from acting? Even if reconciliation was impossible, perhaps they could at least create a platform for them to talk with the archbishop. Otherwise...

“Brother?”

Myuri called out to him, and he snapped back to reality.

“S-sorry...There’s a lot to think about...”

Myuri sighed lightly, then turned to Clark.

“Okay, but why?”

“Huh?”

“What about that whole thing makes you want my brother to leave? Reconciliation might not be possible, but there’s no questioning that he’s on the chi...Sharon’s side.”

She was right. Or maybe it was her way of asking him not to throw the place into any more confusion.

The Twilight Cardinal was a big deal to society.

However, if he were just big and did not move quickly enough, he would be like a bull in a china shop. No matter what he tried to do, it would just make a mess of things.

Clark raised his head and gave a tired smile.

“Don’t you understand? It’s because I can’t renounce the priests. I’m at fault for the same sins.”

The smile he wore was one that was beginning to melt, one that appeared only after crying one’s heart out. Myuri looked as if her heart had been broken when she saw Clark like that.

It was a grown-up expression, different from the ones Col knew well.

“Do you like her?”

When she asked that question, Clark gulped, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth.

“...Yes. That is why I have no right to renounce the priests and the archbishop. I’m a priest, but I’m attracted to Sharon, and that is why I agreed to manage the orphanage. At the same time...” Clark’s lightless eyes turned to Col. “I cannot stand the thought of you being her ally instead of me. It’s such a pity. It’s nothing more than jealousy...”

There was no such thing as a guiltless priest. The scripture even said that people are born with sin in the first place, and that is why everyone must constantly pray to God for salvation.

Clark was not a saint; he was a regular, kind young man.

What pained him was that he was earnestly thinking of Sharon, but at the same time, he had true faith.

When Clark closed his eyes and hung his head, Col found himself reaching out to him, but Myuri grabbed Col.

She looked at him and shook her head.

“Let’s go, Brother.”

Myuri’s keen eyes told him that they could not expect Clark to help them and that anything they could say would only hurt him. Col dropped his hand, and relief crossed Myuri’s face, as though he had put down a weapon.

Nothing would get done if they stayed here. Despite knowing that, Col could not leave behind a man whose heart was about to be crushed by a giant stone mill.

He stood planted to the spot, but Myuri pulled at him and he finally took a step, as though his roots were being torn out.

“If only Sharon and I had been brother and sister like you two.”

The sudden statement froze Myuri in place, her shoulders raised and tense.

She had been trying to somehow overrule her little-sister relationship with Col.

She probably wanted to instantly correct him, but she must have thought that was not mature of her.

She walked off again without looking back, and it occurred to Col that her profile seemed terribly stiff.

“Myuri?”

As they made their way down the hall, Col unwittingly called her name, and she closed her eyes, slowly inhaled, then spoke.

“I’m not always going to be your little sister.”

When she looked up at him with her usual huffy expression, he relaxed.

“I hope you won’t always be such a handful of a little sister.”

Myuri puffed her cheeks in anger, and a girl just carrying sheep’s wool to the room stared up at them.

They left the orphanage without a send-off, and when a chilly breeze blew over them, a remnant of winter despite how bright it was, Col unconsciously sighed. He had totally made the relationship between the priests in the cathedral and Sharon and the tax collectors worse. And Clark, who was supposed to be their last hope to bring both parties together, was no longer able to reprimand the priests because of the affection he felt for Sharon.

But it had not been entirely fruitless.

“Also, Brother?”

“What is it?”

She tugged on his sleeve and he looked to her.

“Did you get the whole point of the conversation?”

She glared at him, the natural progression of the huffy look she just wore.

“That failure of yours taught us something super important.”

He did not think Clark was a failure of his, but he was ready to admit that they were of a similar pedigree.

“Is it about Miss Eve?” he responded, and Myuri puckered her lips and raised her eyebrow slightly.

“Huh...Looks like you’ve grown up a little.”

He was not sure how he felt hearing that from the girl whose diapers he used to change, but she had done good work at the Golden Fern, so he would not be able to argue for a while.

“That evil fox said she wasn’t planning on actually fighting with the people in the Church, but she tricked us! She’s awful!”

She cursed them—Myuri was full of mischief herself, so perhaps she did not like how similar they were.

“Miss Eve is trying to start a war, regardless of how the archbishop and the priests feel. They explained they were trying to make it so neither side wins, though...”

He was not sure if they truly would be able to pull off something like that, and he could imagine Sharon and the other tax collectors being made responsible for starting the war. Even though, most importantly, no one would be happy in the event of a war, Eve alone was sitting in the deepest, darkest place, under layers and layers of webs, elegantly sipping her wine.

But they found out where she was and had a grasp on the heart of their scheme.

“Myuri.”

Col called her name, and Myuri, who had been walking ahead of him, stopped and turned around.

“Yeeeeaaah?”

She deliberately extended the word, responding with a childish tone.

Her red eyes were like those of a puppy, and she knew they would earn her some playtime.

“I cannot overlook Miss Eve’s plan, and someone needs to save Miss Sharon.”

Both corners of Myuri’s mouth pulled taut in a grin.

Her ears and tail appeared, without her even bothering to look around and check their surroundings.

“I want you to stay the cool older brother you are. Of course”—she impishly

clung to his arm—“on the condition that I’m your sword and your shield.”

They would be working together as one.

There was no set way for them to complement what the other lacked.

“If I ever feel like I’ll lose my footing, I remember I have you, and I can keep steady.”

Myuri’s ears and tail flicked about and she asked, “So what are you gonna do?”

“We will go threaten...*Ahem. Request* Miss Eve cooperate with us. On the audacious name of the Twilight Cardinal, that is.”

“Oh-ho? You finally said it.”

There was a hint of wickedness in her smile.

“We’re going fox hunting, Brother!”

But it was a smile he could rely on.

They quickly found out where Eve was in Rausbourne. The knights who acted as Hyland’s guard arrested the people watching the manor and got the answer out of them.

Eve apparently had no particular intentions of hiding where she was, however, so the watchers immediately gave up her location, which turned out to be one of Rausbourne’s so-called public buildings.

When Hyland inquired at the city council, they also learned Eve had gone through the proper channels to use it for trade, since she would be staying for a while.

It was very much like Eve to seem as though she was plotting all sorts of things and also to do everything that needed to be done properly.

“Speak up if anything happens. I’ll place my knights nearby.”

They came close to where Eve was staying and got off their horse.

There were three other horses of excellent build; Hyland rode one, two knights rode the remaining two, and there were also two guards on foot. When Col told her what Clark had said and how deep Eve’s foxhole went, Hyland

completely regarded Eve as the enemy.

“The best of luck to you.”

He did not tell her that was excessive. Eve was balancing the scales not for something like trade in the massive city of Rausbourne but smuggling on an unbelievable scale that would affect the entirety of the survival of the Kingdom.

People’s lives were practically worthless in the face of that much gold.

While he wanted to say he was safe, since there was value in using him, Eve was much too treacherous.

“Myuri?”

“Yeah.”

Leaving behind a worried Hyland and her underlings, Col and Myuri walked off alone.

This was an oddly quiet place within the lively Rausbourne, a district that once thrived but had been left behind by the passing of the ages. They heard there once was a dock on this side of the mouth of the river long ago that used to be an active market.

“This is weird. There are crowds not too far away you can barely breathe in. It’s like a different city.”

“This seems to mostly be warehouses for large companies and artisan guilds.”

The buildings were currently in use, but they were old-fashioned for how large they were and had a somber air. They occasionally passed carts filled with cargo, but they seemed spiritless.

Rausbourne was a city built on the mouth of a river, but the port here was apparently buried long ago in an accumulation of dirt and sand, and the ships could no longer come in. The land then also became very narrow, so the functions for docking were moved elsewhere, and this area rapidly lost its life.

Not only that, but since it was once a lively area, all the buildings were splendid, much too expensive for small-time craftsmen and booth keepers to rent, and its downfall was how unrealistic it was to knock it all down and rebuild the area as a cheap residential district.

The area became deserted when the people left, and once it was deserted, people never came back.

And so these buildings were apparently either used as warehouses that took advantage of the buildings' sizes or second homes for the wealthy who wanted to get away from the deafening hustle and bustle.

That was the district Eve was in, borrowing a public warehouse belonging to the city that was not currently in use, which apparently once specialized in unloading and measuring various kinds of wheat.

"She dresses so flashy, but she's in a place like this."

They finally arrived at the building, and just like Myuri said, the building was much too plain.

The entire first floor seemed to be a loading area with a large wooden door that looked like the mouth of a whale. There were stone staircases on either side of the whale's mouth, going straight up to the second floor.

The building itself was four stories—it was made of stone up to the second floor, and the remaining two were made of darkened wood.

There were no showy decorations anywhere, made with nothing but practicality in mind. And now, especially considering the sadness that it was no longer in use, it was a building that seemed less plain and more gloomy.

"But it is a lot like her."

"Is it?"

"There's a copper plate here."

Snugged into the wall of the first floor of the building was a copper plaque, rusted here and there in green.

"Hmm? Um...Bale Way?"

"It's the name of the street that passes in front of the building. It is proof this building was a central part of this district, one that handled the city's lifeline—which is wheat—and managed the street's maintenance and preservation."

It was often those who lived along a road who were responsible for

maintaining it, and naming it signaled its influence on the land. Even though now it had been left behind, tossed off to the side, it had been a historically important building to the city. How Eve was staying in a place like this instead of renting out a flashy, palatial residence was very much like a merchant who had made it on her own, and for some reason, this filled Col with happiness.

“I think this is where her treachery really shines.”

“I kind of get it. Their watch is looking at us, after all.”

“What?”

When Myuri looked up to the second floor, the door opened, and the guard they’d seen at the Golden Fern appeared.

“The master is waiting for you,” he proclaimed, literally looking down on them from atop the large staircase. Col could sense a confidence that they either knew they were coming here or that they did not mind at all that they had. Or perhaps an act to make their guests think that way.

Eve was a gem whose colors changed depending on perspective.

If he did not think carefully, he might end up getting caught instead.

“Let’s go, Myuri.”

“I need to take out my wheat pouch.”

He was not sure how serious she was, but she pulled out her little pouch, stuffed with wheat that she typically kept around her neck and hidden under her clothes. Myuri, with the blood of Holo the wisewolf, could use the power of the wheat to take on her wolf form. No matter how many bulky guards Eve had, Myuri would surely never lose to them, but it would be a different story if her idiot brother ended up being taken hostage.

Be careful, he told himself.

They made their way up the steps, passed through the open door, and two guards standing behind the door were looking hard at them.

“Pardon us.”

The guards said nothing in particular; one closed the door, and one walked

ahead as their guide. They did not even check to see if Col and Myuri were equipped with weapons.

The old wheat warehouse Eve was renting was filled with things, which was not what they had imagined. But it seemed more like it had been that way for a long time and not that these were any of Eve's belongings. The whole dreariness of the place was at odds with the gaudy outfits of the guards.

Luckily, it was well cleaned and not dusty at all, and the hallway was breezy for how narrow it was. Instead of a dusty musk, they could smell the faint scent of salt from the mouth of the river.

The guard still silently went up the stairs toward the second floor. They could see all the way down to the storage area on the first floor from the stairwell and, at the same time, could see up to the ceiling on the fourth floor.

The large pillars across the open atrium did not seem to be support beams but remnants of a mechanical hoist; the ripped hoist dangled from them like ivy.

When they passed the third floor and arrived at the fourth, there was a desk placed right at the end of the stairs, and sitting at it was that massive attendant, holding a quill. Rows of small, upright letters that did not match his huge stature lined the parchment.

It was in a language Col did not know; he could not read it at all.

"The master is inside," was all the large man said, and then he returned to his writing.

Myuri seemed to be fed up with how relaxed he seemed, and she sniffed.

"Master."

The guard knocked on the door beyond, and a small voice said, "Come in."

The door opened for them, and they were immediately greeted by a caress of cool air.

"Miss Eve?"

The room beyond the door looked like an office, but Eve was nowhere to be found.

“Brother.”

Myuri tugged on his sleeve and Col looked to where she was pointing, and there was another room off to the side, the wall facing the river wide open.

The inside of the room was bathed in a faint blue, a reflection from the ocean, and even though the lively Rausbourne harbor was visible in the distance, it was silent here—it was like a beautiful vista from a dream.

Eve was on the outside of the other room, on a balcony facing the river.

“Have you come to give me an answer to what we talked about at the Golden Fern?”

She sat in a large chair, with alcohol and jerky sitting next to her. The umbrella girl was there, and she smiled at them.

“Isn’t this a lovely view? A long time ago, massive ships pulled right up alongside this very building. They say that twenty people would operate a hoist to raise the neck, letting all the loaded wheat pass down to the first floor through the drainpipe like a waterfall.” Eve spoke with joy, not bothering to look back at them.

“We’ve discovered your trick, Miss Eve.”

When Col said that, Eve recrossed her legs and lifted her right hand. The umbrella girl bowed, and with elegant movements she passed right by them and left for the hallway.

“You used the archbishop’s and the priests’ parental love against them to come up with a plan for smuggling, didn’t you?”

A single seabird screeched as it flew past. These birds were brutal on ships and in the harbor, but they seemed lonely on this side of the river.

“Parental love, is it?”

“I am not impressed with your deception, nor do I sympathize with it.”

Eve seemed to like that answer, as she straightened out her legs and stood up.

“Who told you that? The cathedral won’t open their doors to anyone...and I

doubt there are any priests who will help you because of your connections to Hyland.”

Col could tell that Myuri had changed her footing. Eve’s eyes, dark against the light coming from behind her, were just like those of a beast hunting its prey in the woods.

“I am the Twilight Cardinal.”

Eve’s eyes rounded at his caustic words, and she smiled, tickled.

“You’re right. You have your own influence, your own wisdom. Good, how wonderful.” Eve smiled and inhaled deeply. “And so,” she said, “why have you come here?”

Now, with the light behind her, Eve’s eyes and mouth stood out from her shadow like a beast roaming the dark woods.

With her hostility fully exposed, she even seemed taller.

Eve had gone through so many experiences that Col could scarcely even begin to imagine. He did not think he would win. But at the same time, he was confident justice was on his side.

“I will make an accusation against you on a large scale.”

“Oh?”

“In the name of the Twilight Cardinal, I will publicly accuse you and the merchants of preying on the cathedral.”

“...”

Eve closed her mouth, her lips still bent in a smile.

Col understood that as a request for him to continue, and he took a deep breath.

“I know from my journeys the people do not hate the Church, nor do they think it unnecessary. What do you think would happen if I, in the name of the Twilight Cardinal, accused these greedy merchants, in front of all those people, of trying to get rich off smuggling while defrauding the cathedral? The people would undoubtedly side with the cathedral. And if the Kingdom wants to avoid

a sudden confrontation and war with the Church, they will count their lucky stars and side with the Church to penalize the merchants working illegally.”

If that happened, then Eve and the merchants would not get rich from smuggling but instead could very possibly end up hanging on the grounds of joint conspiracy.

Of course, that was not the ending Col wanted, and after he threatened her, he was planning on bringing up the following:

I want you to recommend to the cathedral that they talk with Sharon and the other tax collectors. Additionally, you will have the traders’ association act in a way that will ease tensions with the tax collectors. The dark clouds of war will then drift past, and Sharon and company should be able to come to a settlement with the priests in one form or another.

Of course, to Eve, who wanted war, that would mean bringing in losses, but it was much preferable to having her be sentenced to death after being accused of planning on smuggling.

The buds of Eve’s plans crumbled the moment Col heard Clark’s story.

Col waited for her words of retreat.

“Fine.”

He won.

Just as that feeling spread throughout his chest, and right before he was about to raise his terms of negotiation—

“If you want to accuse us, that’s fine.”

A dizzy feeling, like he was floating, muddled his thoughts.

It was like he thought there was an extra step in front of him, but there was not.

“I don’t mind. *Sigh*, I was scared thinking about what you might say to me.”

Eve twisted around after she spoke, picked up the glass cup on the table on the balcony, and sipped the alcohol inside.

Col was unsure of what that meant and stood planted to the spot.

“Miss...Eve?”

“Yes?”

She asked in response—was someone not going to attack him while he was confounded? He had imagined instead that someone would draw their dagger, threaten him, and drag him into a bloody quarrel. There was no way he could have predicted that she was going to react like this.

“I, uh...”

“You’re going to accuse me, aren’t you? Go ahead.”

He could understand if she told him not to do it. Why was she so relaxed like this? He panicked—he’d overlooked something.

He was trying to render her entire plot moot. Was her calm demeanor a bluff or something else?

Col looked to Myuri, convinced that Eve would not let them leave alive, but she also wore a puzzled look.

“Oh, I get it. You thought that by ruining my plans, I would fly off the handle, sob and gnash my teeth. And then you’d take that opportunity to bring a deal to the table—is that right?”

It was so on the nose, both Col’s body and mind froze.

“There’s no need for me to be angry. I have other ways of getting rich.”

Eve shrugged, plucked from her mouth the string of muscle from the jerky she had been munching on, and flicked it out beyond the balcony.

“And an accusation is perfect. I may as well tell you about all the wily business that Arugo and them have in their history in this town. The more flashily you can denounce them, the better. This’ll be easy for you, no?”

What on earth was Eve talking about? What had he gotten wrong about her?

He was still unable to answer, and she offered him a genuinely kind smile.

“Heh. That bewildered look is just the same as when you were a kid.”

He had only retreated a half step, but it felt like that was enough to send him back to his childhood. The only fight he could put up was a halfhearted verbal

response.

“Why? Why are you...?”

Her cool smile also seemed a little sad.

“Are you asking why I seem so calm after being accused? Or why I’m going to betray Arugo and the others?”

Col’s silence served as a yes to both.

“I’m fine with being accused because I have people who’ll help me. And I’m not the one betraying Arugo. It’s their bosses who’ll be dealing with them.”

Her explanation brought only more mysteries.

Eve sighed at Col’s reaction and then spoke as though describing something to an incompetent apprentice.

“What we were planning was a large-scale smuggling operation between the Kingdom and the southern mainland. No way would things be settled just with Rausbourne’s branches. They’ll have to have a talk with the important people from the company in their home countries, of course. But the people sitting in those chairs at the main branch are real merchants. They made sure they were insured against dangerous talk of smuggling.”

He got a terrible feeling when she said “*real merchants*.”

Those were evil spirits nested in the innermost sanctum.

Eve’s soft hair fluttered in the cool, salty breeze.

“These real merchants asked me to carry out contract B in the case our original smuggling plan failed. And that would be sanctions against Arugo and the rest of them. It would essentially be a cleanup of merchants who’ve been up to no good in a city far away and hard to monitor from the home country. You came across a similar incident recently, didn’t you?”

She was talking about Desarev.

In Desarev, a merchant from the Debau Company had been selling off treasures from the cathedral without any permission to line his own pockets. Obviously, that was not a policy the upper management of the company,

including Hilde, condoned.

However, since it was effectively impossible to keep a minute watch on the things happening in a town far across the sea, these things did happen from time to time.

Consequently, it was much more widespread in large companies that dealt with long-distance trade on a bigger scale.

“There’s not too much you need to do in order to take care of troublesome underlings. And a fight between two big powers, like the Kingdom and the Church, creates the perfect opportunity. It’s like...a mill. The bigger it is, the easier it is to secret many things into the mix and crush them.”

Eve turned her hand, as though she was turning a stone mill. But what she was grinding to powder was not wheat or grapes but inedible and decidedly non-delicious merchants.

Eve looked like a horned devil, one who tortured souls in hell.

“Smuggling is lucrative but dangerous. On the other hand, cleaning up insolent followers won’t make you rich, but it will secure the future for the real merchants. Their former followers, who used to have power in a faraway land, will absolutely pick up weapons and go to defeat their former masters one day, you see.”

Merchants were well versed in the ways of the world and doubted even their own followers.

But even Hyland was wary of Heir Klevend as a presence of discord.

Almost everything in the world came with such malice.

“And so the real merchants are using me as they please; I’m essentially their gofer. But of course, instead of making fake, placating smiles, I can stand in a good position where either contract can go well and bring me great benefits.”

There was no way she was a gofer.

A bitter taste spread through Col’s mouth when Eve smiled, because he’d underestimated how terrifying she was. The stronger the light was, the deeper and darker the shadow.

“Now, I’m sure you racked your brain to come up with the threat to accuse me of smuggling; what did you want to do with me?”

Eve spoke like a canonical jurist, as if she was going to check his answers.

“I can’t imagine you’d ask for money in exchange for not exposing me. You’re fighting for justice and faith...”

Her gaze stuck to Col, and he shivered.

“You’ve heard about the cathedral, and judging by your personality, I have a feeling you would demand we stop our evil acts out of your sense of justice, but that’s too much. You probably want me to mediate between the cathedral, who are totally unapproachable, and the tax collectors, or something like that. A private reconciliation is still possible, after all. The people in the cathedral want to keep their familial relationship with the tax collectors a secret, and since the collectors are all drifters, I doubt they would care about their public face. Right. I guess that’s your point of compromise.”

Hyland’s, Sharon’s, and his motivations were all clear. It was a given that Eve also knew what sort of situation Sharon was in. Not only that, *they were well behaved*.

That is why if Col took the time to think about each and every detail, it would not be too difficult for him to come to that conclusion.

What made Eve terrifying was how she got there in an instant.

She was a beast of the woods, one who would catch up to him as though he was standing still, no matter how fast he ran.

“Now, is that all you have in your hand?”

Eve clapped her hands together.

“I’m switching the offensive onto you, Twilight Cardinal.”

The wolf coming up behind him opened her mouth.

“You can officially accuse us of smuggling or not. If you don’t, then we’ll move straight into talks of making money. You might’ve already suspected it, but we’ve sent men to hide among the tax collector association, who will then attack the cathedral and give the Church an excuse to start a war. On top of

that, we will make a smuggling deal with the Kingdom, who will need to secure goods. Lord Hyland may not like it, but the king will not refuse.”

Eve took a step back for the moment, as if she had bitten on to one of his feet and was playing with him.

“If you do accuse us, then I don’t mind, of course. Once I see to it that Arugo and company are burned at the stake for conspiring against the Church, I’ll return to the south and raise a glass with the real merchants there. Of course, if the Church has an eye out for any possibility of smuggling after that, then no one will be able to help the Kingdom. If they get in the way of my trade, then that goes without saying. If that happens, then the Church will surely go ahead with the advantage in war. You...”

And the wolf who was Eve Bolan dug her fangs into his throat.

“...will have to fight this battle on your own.”

Threats had power because they backed the other into a corner.

But accusing Eve of smuggling put no pressure on her and would only lead her to other ways of making money.

The one being cornered here was Col.

“Well, take your pick. I’ll let you choose. You escaped from the collar I almost put on you back at the Golden Fern.”

Eve’s gaze turned away from Col and rested on Myuri.

While Myuri demonstrated hostility toward Eve, her mouth was twisted in regret. She must have understood that all the logic was on Eve’s side.

“I understand it’s a hard choice. I had to excuse myself from making it, too. That is why I very carefully made all my plans beforehand so I wouldn’t end up like this. And sure enough...” Eve’s gaze came back to Col. “Here you are. Did you very carefully examine all the things you’re trying to do?”

He did not have the skills to argue, nor did he have any index for what path he should choose.

Neither of the two options Eve presented to him was ideal. Both of them were bad; it was only a choice of the lesser of two evils. And the impact of both

would surely have great influence on the Kingdom in the future.

As he stood there unable to move, Eve took a step toward him. It was so natural and so innocent that even Myuri was delayed in her reaction.

By the time he realized it, Eve was embracing him.

“Why don’t you leave it all to me, Col?”

Her voice was quiet, barely a whisper, somewhat considerate, and even seemed as though she was begging him.

“You’re not suited for things like this, so much that it almost pains me to watch you. But this is not about relative merits. It’s the difference between gold and gems; you’re in pain because you’re trying to fight a battle you’re not suited for.”

Myuri had said that if he were like Luward, then he would not be her older brother anymore. Eve whispered in his ear like a loving mother.

“You can just choose to let me support you. Theologists long ago also had the backing of us merchants in order to get closer to God.”

And then, just as suddenly as she embraced him, Eve let go and put distance between them. She gave Myuri a mischievous grin, which likely meant that Myuri had been keeping a sharp eye to see through Eve as best she could.

“I’ll wait two days. Worry about it all you want. That’ll help build character.”



It was impossible for Col to tell if it was an act or not. All it looked like to him was a gentle smile.

“Well, this conversation is over,” Eve said, clinking the glass on the table against the jug, and the umbrella girl appeared from the hall.

“Our guests are leaving.”

The girl bowed respectfully, then signaled silently to the guard.

Col of course doubted there was anything he could gain from being insistent now.

Eve was unknowable.

“Brother.”

But unlike with Clark, Myuri did not discard their last choice. She was openly considering the option of baring her teeth and making Eve obey with her real power.

They could probably throw the guards around, but all the power in the world would likely not convince Eve to agree with them. There was no way her constitution was so fragile that she would be frightened by the sight of fangs, and Col and Myuri did not have the heart to torture her.

Col turned and shook his head at Myuri, who then regrettably let go of her pouch of wheat.

All Col could do was take Myuri’s hand and leave the room as he thought about how this was the opposite of what happened with Clark, that this must be an allotment of roles.

Eve did not say anything else to them.

They left the building, which was once a loading dock and measuring place for wheat, and he staggered down the road as if he was in the middle of a bad daydream.

Hyland and the others, who appeared on their horses, could tell at a glance that talks had not gone well.

But it did not seem like they knew exactly how it all went wrong.

“Is she a demon from the scripture?” Hyland murmured from atop her horse, gripping the reins and gazing in Eve’s direction.

Even though they had two days left, Col knew that not much would change even if he had a month. He would rack his brain until the very last moment and painfully regret any answer he would choose.

Rather, he would not be surprised if he was told this was Eve’s kind consideration for him by freeing him from this torture in only two short days.

“Let me just say first that you are not at fault here.”

It was the time of day that a red tint covered the sky, and the townspeople were headed home with sighs of relief when Hyland was on her horse again.

“If I was fighting on my own, I would not have noticed anybody’s plot by now; I would just be swept away like a leaf on a muddy stream.”

Behind her, servants were handing lit torches to her knights, who were also on horseback.

“You chased them to the very edges of the scheme. This is our territory from here on out. It’s our decision as lay-nobles to decide if it is a plan where two or three people will have to die. We’re at least going to choose the past with the least bloodshed.”

They returned to Hyland’s manor from Eve’s place and discussed remedial measures. But the most they could ascertain was there was no way to avoid the two options she had given Col, and since there was no way to control Eve, the least they could do was be sure not to put her in a bad mood.

Before the Church had spread their teachings, all people could do was grovel and beg before rampaging nature and plague. That was the class in which Eve lived.

As a result, Hyland mounted her horse in order to report to the king about these bitter options as the very problems of the Kingdom itself. Not only was that her decision as the commanding officer, but there was plenty of evidence of consideration for Col as well. Even though he would normally accompany her as the concerned party to explain the situation, she told him to stay behind.

Just as Col was about to protest, Hyland said as such:

“You are a valuable piece of mine, so if you were to be by my side when I bring bad news to the king, your worth would only go down.”

It was certainly a coolheaded opinion, and Col did not think she was lying, but it was clear that she was arranging to separate him from such a difficult decision.

“Hans, take care of the house while we’re gone.”

“I shall.”

“Now, you lot, we’ll be marching through the night for the first time in a long time. I don’t want to hear how rusty you’ve gotten because we’ve been in town.”

Hyland spoke cheerfully before kicking her horse into a canter. The hooves rattled their feet, and they were in the distance in the blink of an eye. Even after they vanished from view, Col found it hard to move from the spot or even take his eyes away from where they disappeared; there, Hans, who was in charge of the house while they were gone, spoke to him.

“Please return to your room. It is still rather chilly at night at this time of year.”

Col wanted to stand there all night and wait for Hyland to return, but he knew it was pointless. And if he stayed there, then Myuri would be out there with him.

They all returned to the manor. Col looked at the closed gate behind him and sighed.

“Would you like something to eat?”

Col almost said *no*, but he was not traveling alone.

“Just something small. Could you bring it to our room?”

“Absolutely.”

It was probably too much effort for Hans to serve them in the dining hall, and Col doubted his food would go down if it was only Myuri and him in such a large

space. They could relax in their room, and the others would not find out if he ended up giving all his food to Myuri.

As he thought about that on their way to the room, Myuri called out to him.

“Brother?”

“...What is it?”

When he sat on the corner of the bed, Myuri sat beside him.

“I never lost a fight in Nyohhira,” she said suddenly. “But I definitely don’t think I’m the strongest out of all the people who go there.”

Royalty and titled nobility came to Nyohhira from all over the world, and their selected bodyguards supported them on their long journey.

And there was someone in the bathhouse who could easily defeat a whole army of those sturdy soldiers.

But Col understood right away what Myuri wanted to say.

“Thinking everything will go well is just the same as praying to become a god, isn’t it?”

Myuri’s mother, Holo, was once called and revered as a god in reality.

But even Holo could not fight back against the flow of the ages, and she had a pessimistic air about her. Even though she looked exactly the same as Myuri besides the color of her hair, that was also the reason why she seemed so much older.

And he had thought that Myuri had not realized it, for better or for worse.

“I never thought the day would come that you told me to be more modest...I am a very happy older brother.”

Col spoke with a tired smile, and Myuri flapped her ears and tail as though she was about to cry before headbutting him to cling to him.

“We can’t win against *that*. What even is she?”

She scrubbed her face against his shoulder, not because she was crying but likely because she was trying to erase Eve’s scent.

“But.” She stopped moving and said, “I don’t even know if she’s a friend or enemy. Even though she’s plotting something so evil.”

She is a sharp girl after all, Col thought.

“Miss Eve...feels just like the wind or the rain. We can do nothing about her, and while she sometimes brings disaster, she also sometimes helps us.”

Eve treated everything equally in the face of gold.

She had no other intentions; she was impartial and cruel.

“...What’ll happen to the chicken and friends?”

Myuri’s question let Col know he was a single powerless creature on this earth.

“If we can take the option of letting the cathedral know about the smuggling, they might get the option to talk with the priests in the cathedral. They won’t have any more allies in the city of Rausbourne, so they might search for a way to improve the situation but just feel like they’re grasping at straws. If that happens, then they might listen to us.”

“Yeah.”

“But I don’t know if that would have them honestly regret their past actions and reconcile with Sharon and the others.”

Those more world-wise, rather, might try to cut them out by pretending to go along with it and then secretly betraying them.

He did not know if Sharon would end up duped by that or take it as truth.

“And do you remember what Miss Eve said? By taking that option, the possibility of the Kingdom going to war without any help from the merchants gets higher. The Kingdom would not take on such a dangerous bet for the small possibility of reconciliation for Sharon and the others.”

Yet, if Eve had not readied a way for her to play her cards right once her plot of smuggling was discovered, then she would have used that as threatening material.

In the end, they lost to her thoroughness.

“In that case, we would just take the option of not saying anything about the smuggling, but...in the current situation, that means war. The people from the cathedral would escape to the mainland to avoid being taken hostage by the Kingdom.”

Sharon and the others would get to keep their permits for tax collection, but the targets for their anger would be gone.

They would simply be left behind, possibly to fall into a trap of their hatred in the future.

Myuri stayed silent, either ruminating over the explanation she'd heard countless times from the talks with Hyland or because she did not want to believe what she saw before them.

Then, after stirring restlessly, she spoke.

“...What about you, Brother?”

He looked to her, but she was looking straight ahead, her eyes trained downward.

“...Me? Well, of course there's only so much I...”

When he gave the beginning of his answer, Myuri shook her head.

“Not that. I mean in the bigger picture.”

She finally looked at him.

“Because I thought about how there will be so many foxes like that on the path you're trying to take.”

Unlike him, she could see from beginning to end for the whole.

She was likely much closer than he was to the truth of how big the world was and how high the sky was.

“I thought about how so many nuisances like her are going to try and use you. That fox was unbiased in a bad way, but that just means there are truly evil people out there who are unfair in a bad way.”

When Col imagined Eve Bolan appearing filled with spite, he understood everything she wanted to say.

“Even if you tried to act by hiding your name, would you be confident enough to not use it when that Blondie gets in trouble?”

The true function of Myuri’s intelligence was not in witty comebacks or arguing for argument’s sake, nor was it in how she manipulated the human psyche in order to get her way. It was how she could stop in a deep, dark forest and ponder far beyond the scope of what any normal human could foresee.

“...The sheepdog can see far beyond what the sheep themselves can see.”

Right after he murmured that, Myuri’s eyes widened in anger.

“Brother, you dummy! I’m a wolf!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. There’s a passage that says that in the scripture. Please don’t be angry with me.”

Still frowning, Myuri looked away in a huff.

He was too mild. He never thought about his actions, and times like that were when it showed.

“...You don’t think I’m much suited for this, either, do you?”

Strengths and weaknesses.

Myuri looked at him with a frown and then shrugged.

“It’s true you’re not suited for it, sure, but I can still picture you pretending like it doesn’t bother you and you putting on a brave face even if we went back to Nyohhira.”

Myuri’s fangs had only grown sharper since starting their journey.

“And...I want you to fight the Church, Brother.”

“What?”

That was unexpected.

“They’re pieces of shit. I don’t want to see you lose to people like that and go home disappointed.”

“You shouldn’t say that word.”

When he admonished her, she rammed her head into his shoulder as though

in protest.

But he earnestly thought that Myuri was going to try and encourage him to give up.

“I just can’t forgive them about the chicken. Because that’s like...”

Her red eyes turned to him, and he flinched.

She stayed silent, her eyes beginning to swim.

“That’s just like if you were to toss me aside, isn’t it?”

When he saw her on the verge of tears, he was ashamed by his lack of insight. Not only had Myuri sympathized with Sharon, she had placed herself in her shoes. And finally, he saw the real reason why she was telling him to fight with the Church.

His dream was to become a priest.

But while he was fighting with the Church, he at least would not be able to become a priest, and as a result of the fight, he might not even be able to join any holy work again. If that happened, then Myuri’s worst fears would not come true.

There was no point in explaining to her that unilaterally casting her away after becoming romantically involved was not the same as removing himself from worldly affairs after joining the clergy. It was all the same to the one left behind.

But he was not sure what else he should say; there were no words in him.

“That’s why—”

When Myuri continued speaking, his consciousness returned to reality. She cut herself off and wrapped her leg around his, as though she was going to pull some trick.

“I think you should go along with the bad fox.”

“...With Miss Eve?”

“Yeah. She might be a crazy archvillain on Mother’s level, but I think we should rely on her while she’s on our side. She gives you a power different from mine, one that’s like a thick black cloud.”

Some people called that black cloud *power*; some called it *scheming*.

“So, like, if you honestly said you wanted to smash the Church, then she would weigh all the treasure she would get from crushing them and work hard for all those profits, all while licking her lips.”

“I don’t actually want to crush the Church, though...”

He understood that Eve would actually use her intellect to make that happen, though.

“Well, it might not give you peace of mind. I really don’t think she’d come up with some sort of plan to go along with your fragile heart,” Myuri said, her face reading, *I’d be the only one to do that*.

That gave him an indefinable feeling—she was exactly right but also not quite that.

“But maybe what the chicken said wasn’t true.”

Myuri then changed her tone.

“I think it’d be faster to destroy the Church than to fix it. You can rebuild and stuff afterward.”

She never listened to God’s teachings, but that just meant she was not interested. On the other hand, she might have come to harbor an aggressive disgust for the inner workings of the Church as she learned more about its reality.

“Yeah. Why don’t you just stop trying to force yourself to fight and create whatever you want?”

And though, of course, he could not just say yes and create it out of thin air, what Myuri was saying was not entirely unbelievable.

“This isn’t about going along with the evil fox; I’m talking about Blondie. I’m thinking that might be fine after all.”

“Heir Hyland?”

“Yeah. She said something about a private monastery, right? Can’t you just make an institute or something on your own?”

Despite how disinterested she acted, Myuri was always listening and could recall everything.

“People who’ve had similar life experiences to the chicken are living fun lives, aren’t they? That way you won’t have to give up on your dreams, and then Blondie can build a place like that for you as thanks for everything you’ve done so far.”

Col was flustered at her idea, which came out of nowhere, but he remained silent not because he was surprised. If he was surprised about anything, it was that he could not find the basis on which to deny what Myuri just said.

“The beardy old guys who come to the bathhouse told me that monasteries are quiet places meant for living easy, right? You can read as much as you want in a place like that, and you can think about complicated things, and I can nap by your side. Staying holed up in a place away from civilization, surrounded by high walls, will keep the evil foxes and the cold winds away. I don’t think it’s that bad.”

He almost did not believe her when she asked him if they would bring such an idyllic and gentle fantasy to reality.

Hyland was a noble who stood up there among royalty, so she likely owned a large territory in the Kingdom. When he thought back over all the work they had done so far, he imagined she would not likely say no if they asked. Then, with their own private monastery, they could distance themselves from the Church, and he would be free to pursue his own path of faith under Hyland’s patronage.

“...To be honest, I did not even think that was an option.”

“I thought so. You’re into the weirdest stuff—you’re always trying to find your way up on the most difficult path.”

Hardships were trials given by God, and overcoming them was faith.

He did not think that idea would reach Myuri if he told her, and even if she asked *really?* in earnest, he would not be able to prove how correct it was to her.

And Myuri, right beside her foolish brother, had found a patch of grass so

lusciously filled with green.

“I don’t want to get in the way of your dreams, and I hate the idea of going home empty-handed after such a big adventure, because it would feel like we lost.”

And suddenly, here they were, talking about a monastery they could live in peacefully.

Monasteries associated with the Church were so busy with fights over benefices and power of appointment in the dioceses they controlled, intervention from the parent monastery, internal competition for success, and all that—there would be no time to rest. But none of that existed in a private monastery. As long as they had Hyland’s protection, doing “work” every day that was simply growing herbs in the vegetable garden was not a terribly out of reach or fantastical idea.

He had taken the plunge from Nyohhira with great ambitions, and if that was what he got in the end, then many people would look at him with eyes wide in surprise and bless him.

It was much like a favorable tide.

He had lit the signal of reform in Atiph, made allies of Autumn and the pirates in the northern islands, and solved the problem of the cathedral treasures being sold on the black market in Desarev. Here in this city, the great abyss that was Eve was slowly closing in on him. To the Kingdom, his feats could even be called superhuman.

Col could not replace God, nor did he want to.

He should instead be proud that he had gotten this far.

“I will think about it.”

From the tone of his voice, Myuri could sense an optimistic air from him, not his usual complacencies.

Her tail stood up straight.

“R-really?!”

Col smiled wryly at her surprise.

“You’re the one who suggested it, did you not?”

“Yeah, but...”

Myuri herself likely thought it was much too convenient and just a fantasy. Her tail swept over the bed, as though disappointed with how easily he accepted her idea, and Col smiled, then spoke.

“Well, a monastery is a place of prayer, so I doubt there will be anywhere for you to nap. And only proper believers would be allowed to enter.”

“What?!”

She raised her voice in a growl, knocking her shoulder against his.

“You’re always such a meanie like that, Brother!”

“I am not a meanie. There are coed monasteries, but...you’re not a faithful believer, are you?”

“I faithfully believe that you’ll make me your bride one day!”

“Those who have faith in such heretical teachings cannot enter a holy monastery.”

“Brother, you dummy!”

After their back-and-forth, they both sighed. They had not been thrown out into the frigid nighttime sea, nor were they trapped in a little room that had been set on fire.

And yet, a mist that was worse than either of those things covered their hearts.

Myuri bit into his shoulder, perhaps because she did not want to acknowledge it.

She brought up living in a private monastery, such a pleasantly soft dream, because she did not want to see what was in front of her.

“Shall I have them bring up our food?”

They likely would not be able to wipe away this feeling.

When he murmured his question, the clever Myuri responded readily.

“Get me lots of meat!”

When she said that, he could not help but smile.

“Don’t eat too much.”

“Okaaay.”

It was their usual transparent exchange.

But it was more comfortable than anything right now.

This ambiguous anxiety he felt was probably awe at the vastness of the world.

No one could move mountains.

Even Eve, who was like a natural disaster to the two, was surely not almighty.

They crawled under the covers rather early that night.

Ever since they had arrived in this city by boat from Desarev, they had been thrown into a fiery, churning mill without a moment’s breath. They had come face-to-face with the dreams and desires revealed to them by Sharon and the cathedral and Eve, and when Col finally had a moment to relax, he realized how tired he really was.

That must have shown on his face, since Myuri, who typically crawled into bed before him and was out before the candles were, stayed awake a little while longer, stroking his hair.

But there were so many things he had to think about. Regardless of what sort of conclusion the king might give Hyland, Col had to pay attention to the movements in Rausbourne, and especially since he had been designated countless times as the source of this whole commotion, he wanted to play a role in calming the situation by any means possible.

He had not even the beginning of an idea of what he could do, however. He felt somewhat calm on the inside for how grim the outlook was, simply because he was completely lost.

And so, just as he was falling asleep, the only thing he was sure of was that his dreams would be nightmares.

He was so excited to see what sort of nightmare he might have, rather, that

when Myuri suddenly called out to him in the darkness, he was disappointed.

Brother, Brother!—Myuri desperately called out to him in his dreams.

It was as he scoffed—*This isn't enough to wake me up*—and rolled over.

“Brother!”

Whack! She smacked him across the cheek.

“Get up already, will you?!”

She then shook his shoulders, and he opened his eyes. He looked at her with bleary eyes, and her expression immediately filled with tension.

“What is it?”

Myuri hopped off the bed and rushed to the window.

“Some horses just arrived at the manor, and they sounded super-rushed.”

“Horses...? Wait, horses?!”

Hyland's name immediately came to mind, but if she was there, Myuri would have said *Blondie*.

“She wasn't there. But the knights who were with her are.”

“Just the knights? Don't tell me they were attacked by bandits...”

Col threw back the blanket, stepped down from the bed, and also looked out the window. Sure enough, outside the iron gates stood four horses, their breath still heavy and white from the cold.

But when he stared into the firelight, he saw that two of the horses had a banner hanging from their saddle with the royal emblem painted on it. He felt as though they had not been there accompanying Hyland when she left.

“Are they inside the manor?”

“Yeah. They called out really loudly for that bearded old man.”

“Mr. Hans. Something must've happened. We should—”

Just as Col was thinking about turning around, there was a strong, rushed knock on the door.

“Twilight Cardinal!”

Judging from the volume of the voice and the weight of the knocking, it was not Hans. It was probably a knight.

“Coming.”

Col opened the door, and standing there was a knight, just as he thought. He was tall and had a physique big enough to support heavy armor. There was steam rising from his close-shaved, dark-brown hair, almost as though signifying he had run as fast as he could on his horse.

His shoulders were still heaving with his heavy breath, and he looked as though the sky had fallen down.

“A message from Heir Hyland! The king has issued a royal command with regards to Rausbourne without waiting for our report! We encountered royal communications officers on the way, and I am here to tell you what Heir Hyland has said, Your Eminence!”

After seeing Sharon’s past, the cathedral’s deceit, and Eve’s plot, he had encountered enough surprises in this city to last him a lifetime.

Though he believed nothing would surprise him anymore, the world was still much bigger than he thought.

“The king will reportedly arrest the now-violent tax collectors in order to avoid war with the Church!”

Col gulped.

“Therefore, this is reportedly equivalent to a peace negotiation, while also protecting the tax collectors from the Church by using military force!”

The very king himself was retreating. It was understandable, however, since he likely could not ignore Heir Klevend. He could not fight both the Church and Heir Klevend at the same time.

They could not blame him for making that decision, and it was likely an inevitable one in order to keep the country stable.

But there was something Col could not let go.

“So the king has recognized the tax collectors as rioters, has he?”

The tax collectors were drifters. No matter how they were used, there would be no one to mourn them.

By deeming them an unruly mob and showing the Church that they were a nuisance to the Kingdom, it was their tool to ease tensions.

He could easily imagine how they would be used.

“Heir Hyland is making her way on horseback to inform the king of the inside affairs of the city. She has issued this statement!”

With a knightly look, the knight lowered his voice and said:

“Save the tax collectors.”

They had been discarded by their fathers and now were about to be discarded by the Kingdom, who was supposed to back them.

A saying went that an underdog would always remain the underdog.

But Sharon and the others were not dogs.

They were heroes, looking to grasp a chance to reestablish themselves and settle their pasts with their own power.

“I will now head to the city council to assist with lineup! You must do what you can to get a grasp on the situation in the city until Heir Hyland comes back, Your Eminence!”

The knight raised his voice again and had turned his gaze to the ceiling.

But when he said “*assist with lineup*,” he briefly gave Col a meaningful look.

Of the four horses stopped out front, two likely belonged to the royal communications officers. They did not understand how Hyland felt, so the knights were pretending to help with the lineup and were planning on getting in their way as much as they could.

But the king was sending his whole army.

“When will the king’s forces be here?”

“They will reportedly surround the city at dawn!”

That was soon.

If this was an act of precaution against Heir Klevend, then the king would have hated for him to get wind of what was happening and to create a counterplan, so he must have done this all in secret.

“I see...Thank you for all your work.”

“Yes! Please excuse me!” said the knight, almost yelling, then turned on his heel and rushed down the hallway. Hans stood waiting a short distance away, but being the seasoned butler he was, he showed no signs of panic.

“Will you be going out? What would you like to wear?”

Just as Col thought about how little time there was to change, Myuri spoke.

“Give us the fancy stuff.”

Col turned around to look at Myuri; he knew it was hard to let go after having a taste of luxury, but he was amazed that she had to bring it up now of all times.

“Are you gonna walk around dressed like a priest? Your friends will come up and stab you in the back.”

Myuri was the calm one here.

“Very well.”

Hans clapped, and the maids waiting in the neighboring room promptly appeared.

“Wow.”

“I shall take that as a compliment.”

The corners of Hans’s mouth turned upward, and he smiled at Myuri as he spoke flatly.

Col was impressed yet also amazed at how unexpectedly good-humored Hans was, and how Myuri could truly get along with anyone.

“Get changed, Brother. We’ll think about what to do as you do.”

Myuri gave orders like an independent adult when she went out to hunt deer in the mountains of Nyohhira with others.

It was at times like these, when something that needed to be done appeared before her, that she could stay rather calm.

“You’re right. Let’s think.”

They could not act carelessly. They did not have much time, and there were even fewer things they could do.

“Let us think,” he said, repeating it to himself, and Myuri patted his back.

CHAPTER FIVE



CHAPTER FIVE

Col and Myuri agreed that the first thing they needed to do was inform Sharon of the situation.

In the meantime, they had to think about how they would get her and the other tax collectors out of the city. The king had already decided to surround the city with his army at dawn, so it was not unthinkable that his cavalry and scouts were monitoring the city, and if they all walked out in great numbers over the open plains, they would be found right away, even if it was nighttime. Myuri had even grown anxious about there being no place to hide in the open field when they were on the boat to Rausbourne.

In that case, their only option was to go by sea. They asked Hans to send a message to Yosef, who was likely at the port. While they doubted Yosef would turn down the request, they were not sure if the deckhands could arrange for such a thing. Operating a boat was a tough job, so they were busy drinking and singing while they were on land.

As Col prayed that Yosef's men stayed in moderation that night, he and Myuri made their way to Sharon and the others.

"Let's go, Brother. Make sure you don't get kicked off."

"...All I have to do is hold the reins, right?"

They could not cross the city with Col on wolf Myuri's back, since there were too many people in such a big city. So while Hans lent them a horse, what made Col raise his concerns was not that he did not have the skill to rush a horse through a city filled with people after dark.

It was the one sitting between his arms—Myuri.

"Yeah. I said I'd eat it if it doesn't listen to my orders, so I don't think it'll listen to anything but what I tell it to do."

Myuri had said she could not talk directly to wild animals, but it seemed she

could convey her general attitude.

He could still hear the pitiful whinny the horse made when she glared up at it.

After being looked at like that, it would probably use its entire life force to run as fast as it could.

“Okay, let’s go!”

Myuri smacked the horse’s neck, and the horse dashed off into the night of Rausbourne with Col and Myuri on its back.

At this time of night in Nyohhira, things were just getting started, and in a city as big as this, the taverns would still be open for a while. Even in a district with rows of luxurious mansions, the rich were milling about on their horses to take in some fresh air to sober themselves up.

The horse, fearful of Myuri’s fangs, galloped with incredible speed, whizzing right by their noses.

“Myuri, Myuri! This is too fa—”

Col’s words flew into the air the moment they entered a busy street where a free-roaming pig was plodding along, trying to get its paltry share from a tavern, and the horse leaped over it without a moment’s hesitation. After a chilling feeling of weightlessness in his stomach, a heavy impact ran through his entire body. Running through town on Myuri’s back when she was a wolf was nothing compared to this fear.

Not only was his line of sight high from the back of a horse to begin with, and he was certain there was nothing that could save him if he fell off, the impact of the horse’s hooves hitting the flagstone shook him from deep within his rear all the way to his brain, which did not afford him the luxury of maintaining composure. All he could concentrate on was frantically keeping his grasp on the reins and clinging as hard as he could to the horse to keep himself from falling off.

The horse barely paid any attention to how haphazardly he was handling the reins, galloping at an unbelievable speed in tandem with how Myuri smacked its neck and pulled on its mane.

While not as crowded as during the daytime, the streets were still full of drunkards and passersby, and whenever the horse avoided them, Col felt as though everything in his skull would come pouring out, and every time they leaped over someone frozen with fear, he prayed for God's protection.

All of a sudden, after all that, he pitched forward, as though he was being shoved from behind, his nose colliding right into the back of Myuri's head.

"Hmm? C'mon, what are you doing, Brother? Get off."

"Rgh..."

Luckily, his nose was okay, but his hands clenching the reins were tense with nerves, and it was only after Myuri hurried him along a second time that he could finally get down from the horse.

The horse stopped in front of the tax collector association hall. Torches were lit on either side of the magnificent entranceway, illuminating the banners with the royal insignia that hung out from the wall and over the street.

These tax collectors, however, were just about to be discarded by that very Kingdom.

"I hope...Miss Sharon is in."

Col got down from the horse, encouraged himself just as his knees were about to collapse, and managed to keep steady. They came here first and not to the orphanage, where Clark might be, because they were close to the port, and if Sharon was not in, then they could go straight to Yosef to talk to him.

"I think she is. A seabird just looked at us, then went into a hole in the roof."

It was not a watchdog but a watchbird.

"Then, we'll go in—"

Just as he started talking, a window above them opened.

"Chicken!" Myuri shouted, not minding the stares coming from around them, and Sharon, who had poked her head out of the window, disappeared back inside and closed it without a word. As Col nudged Myuri's head, the door soon opened.

“What do you want?”

Sharon appeared, holding a sheathed sword in her right hand. It seemed less like she had come to cut them down after being called a chicken but more that she had sensed this was a situation that required a sword.

For a moment, Col was unsure how to tell her.

“The king has sent soldiers to the city.”

There were only two possibilities that phrase could mean.

Either that war with the Church had begun or...

“To arrest the tax collectors.”

Sharon’s eyes widened for a brief moment, then immediately closed. She scrunched up her face so tightly, they could almost hear it, and she then returned to her regular expressionless look.

“The king is trying to set you all up as bad people.”

“He’d be okay with just a war with the Church; he’s afraid of the civil war the second heir will cause.”

She came to that conclusion right away. Just by looking at how this whole situation was made up, it seemed like Sharon and the tax collectors were deliberately trying to egg on the friction with the Church for the second heir, and Sharon was fully aware of that.

“However, we have orders from Heir Hyland—we are to save you. We have a boat.”

The boat, however, was wishful thinking. They were planning on borrowing money from Hans to get one.

Sharon had her gaze turned to the sky, and she slowly dropped it to look at Col.

“Save? Save *who*?”

Col recoiled at her question, not because he did not understand what she meant but because he knew all too well what she meant.

The tax collectors had been discarded at a young age, finally getting their

hands on the tool that was a tax collection permit after maturing, obtaining a way to talk with their fathers. Yet, the cathedral kept its doors shut, trying to avoid them with deceitful means. In the end, the king himself pulled up the ladder, trying to push them into oblivion.

Col could not even begin to imagine their suffering, having been constantly toyed with by those in power.

But he had to say it.

“We’ll escape, Miss Sharon.”

You mean to kill my spirit and render me a living corpse?

That was what he imagined she would say, but he could say no more to her face.

Those were not the flames of anger in her eyes.

Those were the eyes of someone who was done with the world.

“It has been the same our entire lives. We get in the way; we’re thrown out. None of the people who’ve gathered here are allowed to have a fighting chance against their fate.”

Behind her, the windows and doors of the hall opened ever so slightly, the tax collectors inside looking out on them. This was not curiosity but protective gazes worried about a respected colleague.

They were connected not simply by money.

“But, Miss Sharon.” Col managed to speak only because he could easily guess what she was going to say next. “What can you do if you stay here? Do you think anything would change by taking sword in hand in the end and forcing your way into the cathedral?”

Then, they would be surrounded by the king’s men, arrested as rioters, and would wait for their judgment.

This society was the kind that would cut off a child’s hand for stealing a piece of bread. They could not be optimistic about what could be waiting for them.

“Nothing,” she spat out. “But I’m sure I’ll feel great when I cut off their

heads.”

Her twisted smile sent a shiver down his spine.

“Ah-choo!”

Just as he whirled around at the out-of-place sneeze, Myuri shoved him and he stumbled forward.

Myuri stood before Sharon, rubbing her nose.

“Just say what you want to say already. It’ll be my job to comfort my brother when he’s tormented by regret in the future. So you can stop with the bad acting.”

Col was astonished by what she said.

His gaze darted to Sharon, and just for a brief moment, he thought he saw the gentle expression she wore with the children in the orphanage.

“Not all the tax collectors can wield swords. Some of us are orphans. If we can’t at least put our regrets into our blades, then we’ll never be able to believe in the future again.”

“But can’t you escape out into the ocean, even if you don’t make any feints now? Mister Yosef’s boat is big and fast, you know,” Myuri said.

Col’s eyes widened when she said “*feints*.” They were planning on getting the soldiers’ attention by breaking into the cathedral and letting everyone else escape in the meanwhile. Her display of fanatical hate was her way of showing them there was no use in persuading her to begin with.

She had been calm from beginning to end.

“No.”

She spoke calmly and without hesitation.

“Your ship is a commercial one, isn’t it? Even with oars, it can’t get very fast with how round it is.”

The ships soldiers used in war, on the other hand, were straight and slender like barracudas, with oars packed on either side. A ship like that had caught up to them in an instant when they were escaping from the northern islands, and it

had rammed into their side.

“Not to mention the large number of people on board. We’d have to divert their attention while also lessening the cargo.”

Sharon stuck her sword, sheath and all, into the ground.

Her resolve was indomitable.

Perhaps she knew that things would turn out like this one day when she decided to fight against the cathedral.

But when he saw how collected her expression was, something struck him.

That was not it.

There was something else on her face.

“Miss Sharon.” Before he could help it, he called to her, his tone imploring. “Please don’t lose hope for tomorrow.”

Myuri, who was world-class in seeing through the inner workings of the human mind, stared at him, wide-eyed.

She was like the midsummer sun, and perhaps that had not crossed her mind.

“...How?”

When she said that, he knew.

Sharon’s calm was not the result of careful calculation, that she would turn into her bird form and escape if the time called for it or that she would act out, get arrested, and be used as a warning in order to let others escape.

There was no tragic but brave resolution; he felt nothing but calm from her.

Sharon no longer expected anything of the world.

She had given up; even if she escaped by boat, all that would extend before her would be the cold land she was so used to.

“You’re only keen when it comes to stuff like this. I mean, you are a servant of God, after all.” Sharon smiled ironically and shrugged. “If I can show them that no matter how cruel the world is, there are people out there willing to risk their lives to protect them, at least others will be able to hold on to their hope. They

might be able to put their hopes into the future, even if they move on somewhere else. But...I don't know if that really means salvation, though."

She murmured; whenever she had hope, it was crushed.

The woman's gaze came between Myuri and himself.

By the time he realized it, Myuri was holding his hand.

"But you know, I think it does."

She smiled peacefully and lifted up the sword in one graceful motion, pointing it at Col's chest.

"Can I let you take care of the boat? Everything there belongs to merchants and fishermen; there are no honest men among them who would help us when we're in danger, since we took taxes from them."

It was almost as though Sharon's hopes flowed through the tip of the sword.

"Of course. And you—"

The one who interrupted him was Myuri, who shook off his hand and stepped forward.

"I'll help. You can't do anything by yourself, chicken."

While not as fearsome as Holo, Myuri in her wolf form was still a good match for human soldiers. She could probably escape with Sharon in her mouth if they found themselves on the brink of death.

Sharon, however, shook her head.

She shook it firmly several times.

"This is my story. Please. I want the assurance that I've carved my own path at least once in the end."

She then shoved the tip of the sword harder into Col's chest, and he stumbled backward.

Even though there were only a few steps between the two of them, he could easily mistake her for being light-years away.

He could see the faces of the tax collectors behind Sharon.

The only ones who could truly understand their pain were themselves.

“The only thing I expect of you is good news about the boat.”

That was all Sharon said before whirling on her heel and going back inside the hall. The tax collectors peeking out of the windows all pulled back at once, and they could hear Sharon shouting from the other side of the door.

They might be able to tie her up and stuff her into the boat. But they would not be able to bind her spirit; it would stay trapped in the cathedral in Rausbourne.

Col clenched the hand that Myuri had held, opened it, then clenched it again.

She was not a domestic animal that received only as it lived; she would fly through the sky with her own wings, catch her food with her own talons.

They could not overturn Sharon’s decision, and Col had a feeling that no one should.

“Myuri.” He called her name, and she wiped her face with her sleeve before turning around to face him. “Let’s go. There are still things we can and have to do.”

Even if they could not persuade Sharon, interference was the specialty of the servants of God.

Col inhaled deeply, then exhaled.

Even if Yosef agreed to help, Sharon was of the opinion they would not be able to completely escape.

However, he still had connections he could get ahold of.

“You’ve heard the phrase *selling your soul to the devil*, haven’t you?”

Sharon had entrusted him with a faint thread of light.

Perhaps it was to show that she still held hope, even if it was small.

Myuri opened her eyes and nodded firmly.

Just as they got on the horse and set off, the evening bell echoed throughout Rausbourne. While it was often used to signal the time and market days and to welcome nobles when they visited, it was also used to communicate danger to

the city.

Word of a fire. An enemy attack.

The city council had received contact from the king, and they declared a state of emergency. The declaration was likely being read just at that moment outside of city hall.

They were headed to an eerie part of the city, made even creepier by the unearthly ringing of the bell. A place that felt even emptier when imagining how it had once thrived.

The old public wheat warehouse sat in the darkness of the night, the very shape of silence.

“Just like Miss Sharon said, Mister Yosef’s boat alone could easily be caught up to.”

“He had an oar ship, right?”

And with Eve’s connections, they should easily be able to gather ships. Ships cost money, but Eve had infinite money.

“But do you think she’ll listen to us?”

He could not answer Myuri’s quiet question.

They dashed up the stone steps and knocked on the door.

“Miss Eve! It’s me! Tote Col!”

He thought she might be out somewhere at a lively place in town for a drink, but her personality told him that she would not leave her own bed empty.

Just as he thought, a sharp gaze peered out of the peeping window.

“What do you need?”

“Everything to do with Miss Eve’s business.”

He knew saying it like that would be the most effective. The guard’s eyes widened slightly and he said, “Wait,” before disappearing inside. It was not actually all that long of a moment, but Col grew impatient, and just as he was about to knock on the door again, the door unlocked.

“Come in.”

“Thank you.”

The inside of the manor was dark and silent.

There were not even candlestands up in the hallway, and Col wondered if Eve really was in, but there was a constant breeze like there had been when they came during the day, so he knew that a window was wide-open somewhere.

Still, he felt like there had been no wind outside, so he wondered why it was so breezy inside here...when they reached the room on the fourth floor.

Eve was on the balcony, candles and a meal on the table beside her.

She seemed to have been enjoying an abundant dinner with the umbrella girl as they gazed out to the lights of the port.

“What is it? It’s earlier than the the time we agreed on.” Eve spoke as she spat an olive pit out over the balcony.

“Miss Eve, your deal and our wishes were all but houses of cards.”

Eve, who had been sitting loosely in her large chair, adjusted her posture, now interested.

“What do you mean?”

“The king has mobilized his army. They will surround the city sometime tonight and arrest the tax collectors.”

It was possible that the knight had said “*dawn*” to just give him hope. Even if he did not, Lawrence had taught him that saying there was no time was an old negotiation trick.

“As...Heir Hyland was on her way to inform the king of your plot and Miss Sharon’s motives, they apparently came across communications officers, and they came to inform us. That bell is not the signal for a fire.”

After Eve stared hard at him, she turned her gaze away.

“...This isn’t just to avoid war with the Church. I guess he couldn’t stand the fear of that unruly prince starting internal conflict.”

Eve’s eyes glinted gold, illuminated by the soft, wavering light of the candles

on the table.

“The kings of this country have been unreliable for generations. Kingdom of sheep, indeed.” She practically spat when she spoke, balling up her napkin and throwing it onto the table.

The umbrella girl hugged the jug of wine to her chest, shaken up by Eve’s sulkiness.

“Our feast is over. Once the king’s made up his mind, it won’t easily be overruled. Nothing good will happen to a merchant who tries to approach a ruler like that.”

A king was someone who could create things as he pleased, even the laws the people followed. Eve might be Eve, but this was not someone she could confront.

“I have to ask you a favor, Miss Eve.”

Col called out to her as she gazed across the nighttime sea, thinking.

“You probably do. I didn’t think you came to tell me this out of kindness.”

He flinched when she smiled wickedly at him, but when he thought about Sharon and the other tax collectors’ suffering, he knew he could not afford to be overwhelmed here.

“Might I ask for you to arrange a boat?”

Eve still faced the harbor, only her eyes moving to look at him.

They were cold, like a slave trader appraising merchandise.

“You’re not going to ask me to save the tax collectors?”

“I have traveled with Mr. Lawrence and spent a long time working for him.”

A slight smile crossed Eve’s face.

“Heh. Indeed. There’s no point in acting humble in negotiation unless you’re already on top. I’d give you a pass for broaching the subject like that.”

“Our acquaintance’s boat is not enough.”

Eve held her tongue and hummed.

“Miss Eve, please.”

Col took a step forward and continued.

“How much would it cost to get you to do it?”

She should be able to prepare a boat for them without question.

The main question was if Eve could see a benefit to doing so.

“What if that meant selling your body?”

The one who reacted to Eve’s question was Myuri.

“And what if the price ends up being your life?”

Myuri placed something on the scales not even Col thought she would, and Eve’s eyes widened before she grinned.

“Heh. I wonder if that gloomy old wolf was like this a long time ago, too.”

Out of all the people in the world, Eve was likely the only one allowed to call Holo an “*old wolf*.”

“Your business proposal is sound but lacks a conclusion. If you wanted to show you were serious, you should’ve come alone. If you did, I probably would’ve thought it over seriously.”

It would be hard for the guards to stop Myuri if she was a wolf, even if they all banded together. However, in order to get Eve to listen to Col, it depended on the situation as to whether or not she would allow that sort of violence, and they had not met the standards for that.

As a result of her quiet calculations, Eve smiled gracefully.

“If you were just acting in accordance with your own selfish, dirty gains, then I’d be fine using dirty methods to match, but you’re acting on justice. There’s only so much I can do,” Eve said, her tone somewhat compassionate. And she then quickly added, “There’s nothing in it for me helping the tax collectors.”

Renting out a boat was not free, and that was even doubly so when there was danger involved.

The tax collectors did not seem to have any assets.

And so all he could say was this:

“If I work for you, would the costs not come back to you straightaway?”

The name of the Twilight Cardinal had to have lasting power.

And he would not mind dirty work, if that meant he could save Sharon and the tax collectors’ lives and futures.

“You must be steeling yourself somehow, but I can see in your face that you’ve estimated I won’t make you do work that’s too dirty.” Eve smiled gleefully, an indescribable beauty and terror about her.

“Is that bad?”

“Not at all. Jumping straight in without seeing through the one you’re speaking to is something a coward does. And, well, your judgment is mostly correct.”

“We’ll see about that,” Myuri said viciously, and Eve shrugged.

“If you want to use him most effectively as a tool, then you should be feeding him the food of justice. Isn’t that right?”

Myuri nodded firmly and glanced briefly at Col. Her expression read that Eve was correct, even if she did not want to admit it.

“Regular people have moderate parts good and evil in them. That’s why anything they come up with is so inadequate. The priests in the cathedral are a good example, aren’t they?” Eve said, then stood from her chair and stretched lightly.

She looked just like an elegant noble, who was truly appreciating how beautiful the harbor was at night.

“But you have a faith that I find almost unbelievable. Actually, it might not even be faith. That’s your personality. You are unforgiving of anything crooked, and you think this world needs to be set straight. I guess you could even call it prejudice.”

“Are you complimenting me?”

“Of course,” Eve responded, then took a thin slice of sausage from the table

and tossed it in her mouth. “Whether it be faith or justice, whenever your furnace is fed with what you believe in, you can melt even steel. That is how you’ve come to set all these crooked things straight, from Atiph to here.”

“So then, your arranging for a ship would be a cheap deal, would it not?”

When he informed her of that, Eve turned around to face him and shook her head. It was not a hard-boiled look, nor a wicked one, nor one of exasperation at a young man bringing up foolish transactions.

It was with a terribly sad expression that she shook her head.

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“Why?!”

Col could even say that whether or not the tax collectors would be saved rested on Eve.

Sharon no longer hoped for anything from the days to come, and she was trying to sacrifice herself to at least give the others hope. And she was trusting in him.

Col stepped forward, and the umbrella girl opened her mouth, about to call for help.

Eve signaled with her hand to stop her and spoke.

“If I used someone like you in a deal, it wouldn’t be hard to make a little pocket change. But I don’t think that would be enough to pay to put the tax collectors on a boat and get them away from the king chasing them.”

“But—”

“You’ve sent Lord Hyland to the king anyway, haven’t you? In that case, it would be totally obvious I let them get away. Right now, I’m nothing more than a suspicious miser trying to use the cathedral’s plans for her own selfish motives. But if I let go of the prey the king is after, I would be a clear traitor. I could never conduct trade in this country again for another decade...No, not until the next king forgets about this.”

Eve smiled at the umbrella girl to calm her and then turned back to look at Col.

“And I’m a merchant. I make a living by looking at how the scales tip and extracting profit from that. That’s why I can’t trust you.”

“*I can’t trust you.*” Col’s breath hitched when he heard her say that. It was because no matter what sort of insults might be right about him, he had a feeling that was not correct.

“Heh. I want to title that *A Shocked Face* and hang it up on my wall.”

His cheeks burned when Eve smiled spitefully.

It was Myuri who stopped it there.

“This is my fault, Brother.”

Col whirled around in confusion.

“What?”

“It’s my fault she can’t trust you. Right?”

Myuri directed her last question to Eve, and Eve stood there silently.

Eve looked as though she was gazing at something dazzling in the distance, something she could never obtain.

“You’re right. I’ll never be first for you. That’s why I can’t trust you.”

Eve was twice—no, three times his age. Of course, perhaps it was because of her brilliant wit that she did not seem weak at all, despite how she was supposedly getting on in years. It almost seemed like she was filled with even more life than when they’d met when Col was little.

But despite that, Eve gave a mournful smile like an old woman.

The reason why he did not think it was an act was because he was sure she was not aware she was making such a face.

“That’s why I’d trust you if you were sending that girl back into the thick steam of the baths,” Eve said without a hint of malice. She said it as though it was obvious, as though she was making a pointless promise that the sun would rise tomorrow in the east.

“If you take the girl back to the mountains; serve me by my side; dress, eat, and live with me; and pledge your loyalty to me, then I’ll consider it.”

What she added was perhaps not a way to hastily cover up her true feelings.

“But you can’t, can you? Your bond with this girl isn’t something that’ll weaken with distance. When your life is in danger, you won’t think back on your contract with me; you’ll think about her. And you’ll probably use anything you can in order to come back alive. Even if it means turning your back on God.”

He could not say anything in return because he could clearly the truth of her words.

“I can’t have someone like that by my side. The more useful you are, the truer it is. Someone useful will serve me well for a while, adding on premium after premium. And then, when you come to a truly important turning point one day, you won’t take me but her.”

Eve quietly shrugged.

“I would lose things more important than my life at the same time—my money and you.”

Eve smiled in self-deprecation, and the umbrella girl stepped softly up to her side.

Eve looked at her and smiled gently.

That was the thought process characteristic of someone who was constantly surrounded by betrayal and deals that might send yesterday’s profits into tomorrow.

But there was also a certainty that someone only backed by experiences could produce.

“And so no. I won’t help you.”

Eve struck down with her hatchet of logic, closing the curtains.

“I won’t save the tax collectors. There are certainly people out there with destinies like that. I’m well aware that me managing to claw my way up was nothing short of a miracle. It’s not unusual.”

Col’s face twisted even further, knowing this was her showing kindness and not her striking on an already unfortunate situation.

“You can worry, groan, and pray to God. You have a devoted girl at your side when you do. There’s your hagiography, no? Your quality as the Twilight Cardinal will only go up, won’t it, Tote Col?”

When she called his name, he looked up.

Standing there was the woman he’d met when he was a child, who had looked out for him so many times.

“You left that dreamlike bathhouse. For what? Surely not to lose yourself in sweet dreams.”

They were words of encouragement, different from what Lawrence, Holo, or even Myuri would say. Eve did not hate him, nor was she trying to drag him into depravity; she simply treated him fairly.

“This conversation is over now. You should deal with struggles your own size.”

He had nothing to say in response. Even though the one who had the means of saving Sharon’s hopes and the tax collectors was right in front of him, he could not reach her.

He remembered how high the edge of the boat was when he had fallen into the dark sea. He remembered how he’d felt then, that the impossible was impossible.

His only salvation was believing that Myuri was there, that she would be willing to drown with him.

“Now, since you gave me that tip, that means I have work to do. If you’ll excuse me.”

That was so the plotting Eve herself could escape. Of course, he could not blame her. There was no connection between the tax collectors and her; rather, she was much closer to them in position than he was. She signaled to the umbrella girl, and they both began to walk off; there was nothing he could do to stop them.

He could not even find fault with them for quickly escaping the city.

Wait.

His inner voice spoke to him.

Eve did not say she was escaping. She said she had work to do.

What he then thought of was the second contract she had undertaken—that of trapping Arugo and company, entrusted to her by the main branches of the companies that wanted to get rid of them.

However, when he thought about how she would be going to the cathedral now in this situation, he could not help speaking.

“Miss Eve, it will be dangerous going to the cathedral. Miss Sharon and the others will be headed there, armed, and the royal communications officers are putting the city council into action by mobilizing the city’s sol—”

He said that much but could not continue.

He was overwhelmed by the look on Eve’s face when she turned to him.

“Miss...Eve?”

“...”

Eve gulped and was shocked back into reality.

She then looked away. Her profile read that she had made a terrible mistake.

What did that mean? Why did she look at him like that?

She was not childish enough to get irritated by his foolish meddling.

There had to be meaning to it.

Why? What sort of work was she planning to do this late in the game?

And, without a doubt, it was something that he was not to know.

“Don’t look at me like that, Col.”

Eve offered a troubled smile.

But Col was not so much of a foolish lamb to be tricked by that smile.

The work she had that he should know nothing about could not be a report on Arugo and company. They already knew about that, and now that the Kingdom had decided to avoid war, he doubted that reporting on Arugo would be meaningful to them in a bad way.

Then, what else was she planning?

Col stared straight into Eve's eyes. What crossed his mind was the image of the three bulls headbutting one another. Now that she could no longer profit off the tax collectors, there was only one thing left worth using.

The cathedral.

"Col."

Eve, now irritated, called his name again, and Col reflexively turned around to look over the balcony at the dark sea, faintly lit by the lights from the port.

Eve betrayed the skewed parental love the priests managed to squeeze out and even betrayed her fellow merchants Arugo and company, whom she had called for betrayal itself. It seemed as though there was no end to this darkness.

Then, was it not appropriate there was another level to it? Was it not appropriate for her to have a plan for a time like this? And that concerned the cathedral.

However, it did not seem like Eve would wander up to the cathedral in this situation. He would not be surprised if the whole area around it was already in chaos. More importantly, since Hyland was bringing word of the plot brewing in the city to the king, Eve, who was at the very center of this whole plot, milling around the cathedral would only bring her unwanted suspicion.

Or perhaps, thinking conversely, was she going to ask for protection from the priests?

He felt like it was close, but it was off, somewhat. Would Eve do something so commendable?

No. There was no question that Eve would try to create obligation from the priests. And when Col thought about how she would also fabricate a plan that would benefit her as well, it struck him.

"You're going to use the archbishop and the priests as shields, aren't you?"

Eve's expression stayed frozen. Not even her eyebrow moved an inch.

But that was an expressionless face that only merchants practiced, and the reflexive act meant to keep her emotions hidden instead laid out the contents of her heart clear as day.

Col was right.

Eve was trying to escape from the city, but the conditions she had to overcome were essentially the same as what the tax collectors faced.

The one plan that would guarantee their escape involved the priests in the cathedral, who were the very opponents the king had to pay careful mind to. And most likely, it was not Eve who would be asking for help from the priests, but they would put themselves in a position to show that they saved the priests from the tax collectors' riot and then demand gratitude from the Church.

That is why, perhaps, she ended up calling it "*work*."

And yet, there was still one question remaining.

How was Eve going to get the priests out of the cathedral?

How he came to that conclusion must have made itself evident on his face. Eve's expression relaxed.

"I'll send you a letter later."

That was the composure of a victor.

They were always thoroughly prepared, because they never knew what and when something might happen.

When he thought back to the manor Hyland was renting, he figured it would not be difficult to get the priests out of the cathedral. The cathedral was in the center of the city, after all, which meant it likely had a much older history than the manor, and so— "*Gasp!*"

The two things came together like lightning.

Eve acted quickly.

Col only just barely managed to twist himself and block Eve's hand because he had once heard from Lawrence how fierce she was.

But when his posture crumbled and he fell on his rear, she straddled him, grabbed his collar, and put her weight on him there, ramming his head onto the floor. In his shock, he was almost impressed by how fluid her movements were. He somehow managed to keep his eyes open, and he saw her reach for the

dagger on her belt in his field of vision.

Col was not going to hesitate, either.

“Myuri!”

A wolf howled.

Before Eve could fully draw her dagger, a mass of silver passed over Col’s body, and then the beast was pressing her down, faceup on the balcony just a moment later.

“*Gah...cough—*”

Col readjusted his breathing and calmed his dizziness from having his head hit on the floor. The umbrella girl was wary, but she mostly appeared ready to cry at seeing Eve’s state and did not seem like she was going to draw any weapons.

“Ever since we came to this building...*Ahem*, something stayed on my mind.”

He stood and looked to the guards, who were entering from the hallway after hearing the commotion.



They of course feared the silver wolf on the balcony who was about to bite their master.

“It’s a quiet, still night. But why is the inside of the building so breezy?”

“Grrrrr...”

As Myuri let the guards know she was watching them, she glanced to Col.

Perhaps she had not noticed it.

“This building is one with a long and honorable history in this district. And large ships could once dock right beside it. That means...”

Even though Eve’s arm was being held in place by Myuri’s paw, she still gripped her dagger and would not let go. Col continued speaking, somewhat impressed by her refusal to give up.

“There’s an underground passage in here, isn’t there?”

One that led all the way to the cathedral.

Eve might have decided to set up camp in such a remote place because of her aesthetic sense, but her aesthetic was money.

“Miss Eve.”

When he said her name, the hand holding the dagger gripped tighter, then relaxed.

After a dry clatter, Eve spoke.

“Stand down.”

The guards tried to resist when she said that, but it lasted only a second.

Myuri growled, baring her fangs. Though she was not as giant as Holo the wisewolf was, she looked frightening enough to let anyone who might encounter her in the forest think that anything but begging for dear life was futile.

“...I underestimated you, thinking you were easy prey, but look at me now,” Eve said with a sigh. “I slipped and said ‘*work*.’ That was why I lost.”

“You’ve emerged from the shadows with evil plots plenty of times, so of

course even I would be on my toes.”

Eve smiled, and Myuri apparently put even more pressure on her, since she groaned.

“Myuri.”

Col warned her, and after her tail swished back and forth, she looked at him, unsatisfied.

“Will you spare my life?”

Eve did not seem like she was asking for any pity at all, but she knew that Myuri was eager to rip her head off.

“That depends on you.”

“...”

And unbelievably, Eve fell silent.

He almost felt respect for her, that she did not readily say yes in a situation like this, and for some reason, it even made him happy.

“What are you going to make me do?”

It was almost as though she was threatening to kill herself by biting out her own tongue, depending on what his answer was.

“Miss Sharon and the tax collectors are forcing their way into the cathedral. And you can help them.”

Myuri hung heavily over Eve as she made a terribly disgusted face.

“...I don’t think so, but if I say no, I’ll only become a snack, won’t I?”

Col stood and looked down at Eve as he petted Myuri while she growled.

“You might not like it, but that is your only option. Open the cathedral doors, let in Miss Sharon and the others, take them here, and put them on a boat you’ll prepare. If the priests are also on board, then the king can’t touch them. Is that not correct?”

“Logically, yes,” Eve said and sighed. “I’ll give it a shot. At the very least, we could easily help them, and if I show myself, then I’ll fulfill the promise I made.”

While Eve was fine betraying the priests, she had made a contract to help them when the time called for it. She was no one's ally—it was all for the money.

"Then lead the way, Myuri."

Myuri turned back to Col, then as a final desperate tactic, she pressed down hard on Eve's chest, then released her front paws.

"Myuri, I want to do something about Mr. Clark and the children and bring them here."

They must be shaking at the sound of the emergency bell back in the orphanage, without a clue as to what was going on.

Despite the situation they were in, Myuri rubbed her neck against him like a clingy dog, demanding he pet her. When he ran his hands through her oddly fluffy yet stiff fur, she huffed in approval.

"Providing is preventing, isn't it, Brother? Write a letter. I'll give it to the dogs and make them deliver it."

Myuri had threatened every stray dog they encountered on the streets. She said that Ilenia, the sheep avatar, had taught her that she should make allies of the animals in town for when they needed them.

"Miss Eve."

"Fine, fine. Hey, weren't you listening?"

Eve looked to her guards and barked orders. The guards seemed to hardly believe that Myuri spoke and were literally shaking in their boots. They hurriedly retrieved paper and ink from the shelves in the room and placed them on the floor.

"There are some people I want to escape here. I hope you don't mind."

Col double-checked with Eve, and she sulkily looked away in a huff.

"None of this will make me money, honestly," she complained, sitting cross-legged.

The secret passage was on the first floor, which was half in the ground and

once meant to hold large amounts of wheat, behind a false wall, which was behind a pile of bricks, which was behind a stack of junk.

The closer they got, the more obvious the breeze was, making small whistling noises as it passed through the bricks.

“Grrr...”

Myuri slowly approached, kicking the bricks away with her front paws, then immediately bit into the chains wrapping around the portcullis that appeared from behind.

“Hey, I have a key.”

She paid no mind to Eve’s command, ripping into the chains as if they were sculptured candy.

“...Those chains are made from good iron...”

By that, Eve did not mean she was amazed that Myuri could bite through something so high quality; she meant that they were particularly valuable items.

“You all go first, Miss Eve.”

“...I have limits to my recklessness, you know. I’m not going to attack you.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Eve sighed, signaled to her guards with a glance, and sent them in first. The umbrella girl and the massive man stayed behind in the warehouse for when Clark and the children came.

As long as Myuri stayed by Eve’s side, she would not betray them.

“I’m practically a prisoner. Is this what you want?”

Col nodded and motioned for her to walk.

The underground passage was cool and damp, but it was well maintained, as though people had passed through it many times. There were even used candles that were not particularly old stuck in the candleholders placed here and there throughout the hallway. The ceiling was high enough that they could walk around normally, so perhaps it had been used in real wars a long time ago.

None of them spoke, and what Col thought about as they walked through the passage was what Eve had said.

They would open the cathedral doors from the inside, harbor Sharon and company as they put the other tax collectors through the underground passages and onto the boat Eve prepared. The king's men would likely not touch them if there was a priest with them.

Logically, that was correct, and Eve recognized that. That was because Eve herself was planning on making her getaway that way in the first place.

And yet, she was negative toward a plan that included the tax collectors.

He doubted she had a plan in motion after all that...No, would that be letting his guard down?

He could sense nothing from her as she walked ahead of him.

And they had no choice but to do it. There was no time left.

"Hmm?"

Then Eve stopped. Myuri, too, had her ears perked.

"Judging by our position, it's probably the group of tax collectors heading for the cathedral."

The air was vibrating slightly around them. There were many people walking above them.

"Let us hurry."

Eve shrugged and started walking again.

They then walked about the distance of one parish. At the end of the passage, there was another portcullis, similar to the one they'd entered through. Eve watched silently as Myuri bit at it and twisted the metal lock, ripping it to shreds as sparks flew everywhere.

"A vault?"

They went up the stairs, illuminating their way with the candles they held in hand, and they saw silver cups and various ornaments tucked away on the shelves.

“Take some with you on our way out, and that’ll give you a little pocket change,” Eve joked, signaling to her guards to open the lock on the door.

“The vault door locks from the inside?”

“The front entrance is also the invasion entrance. This is the way you want to go if you’re coming in from the cathedral.”

Col nodded, understanding.

“Now, only God knows if this will turn out the way you want it to.”

She likely deliberately said it like that, since they were in the cathedral.

They exited the vault along with Eve and company, coming out onto a chilly stone hallway.

There were images of parts of the scripture and banners with the Church’s insignia on the walls.

They then went up another staircase, removed a wooden board that blocked their way overhead, and came up behind the most beautiful part of the cathedral, the nave pulpit, where the services took place. Right above their heads, angels painted on the ceiling smiled down at them.

“...”

Col knew, of course, that the cathedral was massive. But the inside was emptier than he had imagined.

He looked to Myuri, whose pointed wolf ears were twitching every which way as she glared at Eve, a growl rumbling deep in her throat.

“Hey, stop looking at me like that. This isn’t a trap.”

It was not just Col’s imagination that the place was exceptionally empty. He sensed no human movement anywhere.

“And it’s not abandoned. They’re probably in the copy room. This way.”

They followed Eve’s lead. The echoing of their footsteps was dreadfully loud and almost felt eerie.

And what bothered him the most were the faint sounds of the earth rumbling.

“I would appear that all our actors are taking their places in the plaza.” Eve noticed that had been concernedly looking toward the cathedral’s main entrance, and she explained. “Well, I doubt the soldiers from the city council will end up fighting with the tax collectors. The city guard is just like them—they’re drifters with a little more guts. I don’t think they’re going to fight by putting their lives in danger. They’ll probably stare down one another until the king’s army gets here.”

As he hoped that would be the case, they went from the nave to the aisle, then into a hallway with a row of rooms. Eve turned to the left without a moment’s hesitation and loudly knocked on one of the doors.

“It’s me, Eve. I’m opening the door.”

Above them was a carving of a demon with the words SILENCE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

When she opened the door, the pungent smells of parchment and ink wafted around them.

“You have a guest, Your Grace.”

As Col tried to enter the room after Eve, Myuri got close enough to rub against him, and they entered together. He realized later she was being cautious of a surprise attack.

“A guest...?”

It then seemed like a white ball of fluff stirred. It was a lone old priest with a long white mustache and beard, his large, corpulent body hunched over the writing desk.

“This is...a surprise.”

He seemed to be shocked by Myuri’s presence, but he was relieved to see her sitting obediently by Col’s side.

“This here is more of a surprise. It’s the Twilight Cardinal.”

The archbishop’s eyes widened and looked to Col.

“What...? You’re...?”

“My name is Tote Col.”

He greeted the man, but he was not sure what sort of look he should wear on his face. If this was the archbishop, then that meant he was a priest who plotted while knowing all about Sharon and the other tax collectors, who refused to either acknowledge his sins or even talk with them in secret. A despicable fallen man too eager to preserve himself.

However, the old priest she called the archbishop was not much different from the other high-ranking clergy he often saw in the baths of Nyohhira. They were quirky but rich with knowledge and experience and dedication to their holy work. They loved alcohol and meat just as much; they were more gluttonous than any young person.

He was not evil.

But he was not good, either.

“...I am the archbishop of the Rausbourne diocese, Fray Yagine...But...” Yagine, perplexed, grasped at his beard that reached his waist. “Eve, why did you bring him to me?”

“It’s my contract. I made a promise to bail you out when the time calls for it.”

“What...?”

“I guess you didn’t hear the bell. The king is closing in on the city.”

Yagine looked rather surprised, but he did not immediately stand from his chair.

He simply gave a tired sigh.

“I see. And so why did you bring him here—?”

“I want to save the tax collectors,” Col interjected, and Yagine turned to look at him. “Your Grace, I will be opening the cathedral doors.”

“The doors? No, wait, wait a second. The king is laying siege to the city? But what for? Has he decided to wage war with the Church?”

Yagine looked to Eve, and Eve gave a vexed sigh.

“The opposite. He was afraid of the Kingdom going to war with the Church

because of the tax collectors pressuring you. He's here to arrest them."

"I-impossible...! The tax collectors are working under royal authority...and if they're just going to make amends with the Church, then that shouldn't be necessary!"

"Think about whose backing the tax collectors have. It's that unruly prince," Eve said.

The old priest's eyes widened, and he then placed his hand on his forehead.

"Heir Klevend...He hasn't given up on the throne yet?"

"It's the same as you clinging to your position."

There were as many thorns in their conversation as Col could think of.

Eve smiled, and Yagine drew up his shoulders.

"...I can't deny that. But—"

"You want to tell me you have your reasons, I'm sure. I'm tired of hearing it. Everyone has their own circumstances. I'm sure that also applies to why you are here alone, is it not?"

What happened to the others?

They had all escaped long ago, and Yagine here had taken on the final responsibility on his own.

"...I am the archbishop. The only time I may leave this place is when God calls me."

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to call you," Eve said as she shrugged, rapping her fist on the nearby bookrest. "Make the necessary preparations—quickly. Just as the contract states, I've got the boat ready."

"W-wait. What about what the Twilight Cardinal just said?" Yagine asked, turning to Col.

He was likely worried about Sharon and the others.

Col felt an indescribable irritation looking at the man's good-natured face.

"Miss Sharon and the rest have consistently been treated cruelly and have

lost faith in the future. And yet, they have taken their swords in their hands, believing that by sacrificing themselves, they can allow the orphans and others on their side to escape, and that gives them hope that someone will help all those who make it out.”

When he’d asked Sharon what breaking into the cathedral with the intentions of dying would accomplish, she had said, *“Nothing would change. But I’m sure I’ll feel great when I cut off their heads.”*

That twisted smile of hers was not an act but a genuine facet of herself.

But he felt nothing more than a nauseating sadness when he imagined how she might feel when she found out it was Yagine who she would be standing up to as a result of her hate.

Sharon could probably swing her sword in peace if Yagine turned out to be an abominable evildoer, who constantly hurled insults until he was red in the face, who scrabbled by any means necessary in order to survive.

However, the man sitting in his chair and looking at Col was far from that sort of evildoer. It was clear that Yagine alone had stayed behind at the cathedral, a place meant for countless priests, their apprentices, and those looking for meager work to gather.

It was also unlikely it was only Yagine who was the closest thing to a good person and that all the rest were evil. There was no doubt they argued countless times among themselves, picking through their brains, faith, good nature, parental love, and of course their attachment to their positions for a way to deal with Sharon and company while also preserving the Church’s standing as one of the largest cathedrals within the organization in the Kingdom.

They all had their own excuses.

He could tell that just by looking at Yagine’s pained expression.

But the reality was that they had not helped anyone.

And yet, now, they still could.

“Your Grace, we will open the doors to the cathedral. We will then invite Miss

Sharon and the others inside, go through the underground passage, and all escape to sea on the ship with Miss Eve and company. Okay?”

Yagine pursed his lips and held his breath.

Under normal circumstances, there was no need for him to ask the archbishop’s permission. He could just order Myuri to leer at him and then open the doors as he pleased while he was trapped.

Yet, he asked for permission because he wanted Yagine to make up his mind.

He did not want him to keep running from Sharon and the tax collectors but to stand before them.

“Your Grace.”

Col took a step forward, and Yagine tightly shut his eyes and spoke.

“Twilight Cardinal, please let me speak.”

“About what? What more could you possibly say?!”

It was after Col yelled, fed up with how this man just wanted to keep running.

“Do you have a place to escape to?”

He caught Col off guard.

Col was surprised he’d asked such a stupid question but also surprised that he himself did not have an answer.

“I can open the door and invite the tax collectors inside. I can pass through the underground tunnels and get on Eve’s ship. But...” Yagine restlessly stroked his long white beard, as though he was thinking as he spoke. The wrinkles on his forehead deepened, his cheeks flushed, and he continued after turning to the ceiling as though asking for help. “But yes...After all that, we have nowhere to go. It’s a bad move.”

“Why?!”

The king did not want to fight with the Church. That meant he would not attack a ship if the archbishop was on it. He should be free to go where he pleased; he just needed to find a convenient spot and get off there.

“Eve...Do you agree?”

Yagine, bewildered, looked to Eve. Eve sighed and looked to Col.

“Col. This is about appearances.”

“Appearances?”

“The tax collectors take up arms in anger and break into the cathedral. The doors open; they pour in. But afterward, after some sort of miracle, they take the archbishop to the port and openly escape by boat. How do you think people on the outside would interpret that?”

“...”

He froze in shock.

“It’d just look like they took the archbishop as hostage and escaped, wouldn’t it? The king would fear the breakdown of the settlement talks and frantically chase them to the ends of the earth. He needs to prove that the Kingdom isn’t to blame, you see. And on the other hand, how do you think the Church would approach this?”

After Eve brushed him off, Yagine answered painfully.

“The pope...would see the acts caused by the Twilight Cardinal and judge that he would no longer be able to stand idly by, and he’d actively start a war with the Kingdom in order to turn the situation around. Then...he would certainly want to light that spark before the Kingdom can extend an obvious hand of reconciliation.”

And then what would happen if he received a report that the tax collectors in question were on the same ship as the archbishop from the cathedral?

“There’s no doubt he would sink that ship. I’d do it. The dead tell no tales. The Church would put the ship under themselves, then say with a straight face that the Kingdom did it. It’s all about appearances,” Eve said in an easygoing manner.

“And yet,” Yagine added, turning to look at Col apologetically.

It was almost as though he was sorry for being unable to help Sharon and the others.

“You want me to open the door and get on the boat as you suggest, like it’s

nothing?”

Even if there was more to it, Col doubted that the hate in Sharon’s eyes was an act.

“As for your safety, at the very least, I can—”

“No, Twilight Cardinal. That is not what I mean.”

Yagine suddenly stood and spoke with a tragic spirit, as though he was pleading to God.

“I don’t care if they rip me to shreds. But what if they don’t? I doubt they would approve of leaving me whole and getting on a boat with someone like me at the same time! I can imagine it—they would stand before me, stare at me without a hint of either anger or compassion, and then shove me into the underground passages. Then they’d seal it off and just wait for the king’s forces to come!”

Sharon was cool and rational. She even had the eyes to stare quietly at the scales as she stood beside the raging flames of hatred.

Say that the cathedral doors opened, Sharon found them, and Col proposed that she use the archbishop as a shield to get on the ship and escape. This was Sharon, after all, so she would likely realize the possibility that they would be left stranded at sea in a terrible situation, targets of both the Church and the king, just like Eve and Yagine said.

And then what would happen?

He could easily imagine it.

This was Sharon they were talking about—she would let the archbishop escape, and they would remain alone in the cathedral.

Then they would accomplish their roles as decoys.

“You cannot open that door, Twilight Cardinal.”

Myuri stepped before Yagine and growled.

Yet, Yagine stepped forward, as though he had not spotted wolf Myuri at all.

“You cannot open that door. As long as the door stays closed, there are still

solutions. If we open the door and let the tax collectors inside, that would give definitive proof that they broke into the cathedral. If that happens, then the only measure the king can take is execution. After beheading the rioters, he might negotiate with the papal office to ask they wipe this all from the records. We must keep the door closed to save the tax collectors. If we do, then we still have the option of me defending the tax collectors...no, my sons and daughters with my own hand! That is the only sliver of hope we have left!"

It was much too rational to be a made-up story for self-preservation.

And yet, could he just abandon Sharon and the others after all this? Even though the ship that might save them was just down the passage?

Perhaps it was true that Yagine would defend Sharon and company, but the question was how useful it could be. Since the king was worried about Heir Klevend's civil war, he had to inform the tax collectors all over the Kingdom about this policy so that the same problem would not repeat itself.

There were plenty of reasons to cut off the tax collectors' heads.

"But then...we..."

Col was unable to continue or breathe very well.

Yagine looked at him.

His expression was that of a friend who shared his pain.

"The reason we just could not confront our sons and daughters was because we were afraid that it would become the cause of war. If word somehow got out that we spoke with them, then one could even say that the cathedral would suddenly fall."

And that was why they planned what they did, because they figured that looking like cowards was much preferable to the great tragedy that would be war between the Kingdom and the Church.

"Twilight Cardinal." Yagine inhaled deeply, then exhaled. "That wolf is a nonhuman, is she not?"

Col was startled.

Yagine knew about Myuri. He had a dangerous card in his hand.

Yagine's clear blue eyes gently gazed at Col's tense expression.

"I knew it. I'm Sharon's father," Yagine said, looked to Myuri, and dropped to one knee. "Those are the eyes of one who wants to bite me."

A growl rumbled in Myuri's throat and she lowered herself. It was to show that she would leap at him at any time, and it was not an act.

"I see you heard the story from Sharon, and you must think of me as cold-blooded, that I unilaterally dumped my wife. But please allow me to speak. The relationship between a man and a woman is complicated—"

"It'd sound more convincing if you weren't the archbishop," Eve interrupted, and Yagine smiled dryly.

But Col understood. Indeed. That had to be right.

Yagine's selfishness as a priest could not have been the only reason for the deterioration of his relationship with Sharon's mother—there had to be several reasons.

"Well...I am a priest, and that was one cause; that much is for certain. We were considerate of each other's positions at first, but over time it grew complicated, and by the end we were hurling abuses at each other. It was an ugly breakup. I was naive and a fool. That hasn't changed, though..."

He did not seem like he was lying. It was clear that Myuri, her stance lowered, was desperately trying to stimulate her own anger by growling.

Perhaps it was true that Sharon's mother decided she would never associate with humans again.

But naturally, the possibility it could be a common reason, one gained from a marital relationship between two normal people, did exist. Just because it was a romance between priest and nonhuman, that did not mean it always had to be special and miraculous.

"Twilight Cardinal." Yagine stood, smiling softly; gripped the crest of the Church that hung around his neck; and slowly bowed his head. "Thank you for getting angry, grieving, and coming this far on behalf of my daughter. I give you thanks from the bottom of my heart."

Col was not sure what he should say to the man before him.

He thought perhaps everything he had done until now was pointless, that all it was going to do was throw the world into chaos.

“By the way, Eve. Will you help out with assisting the people who Sharon wants to save?”

“Can I take payment from the vault?”

“Of course—I don’t mind. We’ll say I took it.”

“Can do. I’ll get their attention by lighting up your ship and finding myself a fishing boat in the meanwhile. It’ll take care of their living expenses for the time being.”

Yagine nodded.

“There should be a hardworking pastor teaching reading and writing to the children at the orphanage. He would be a great asset to your company.”

It was just when Eve smiled wryly in response to what he said they heard the hum of voices coming from outside the room and down the hall.

“Brother.”

Myuri, perhaps thinking there was no need to hide who she was anymore, called out.

“Is it Clark?”

Myuri nodded, so Col whirled around and went into the hallway. He came face-to-face with Clark just as he appeared in the aisle from the nave.

“Your Eminence!”

“Clark!”

He then immediately turned around and acted as though he was doing his best to calm someone.

And then silhouettes appeared, as though ignoring his attempts to restrain them.

They were children, holding wooden sticks and pots in hand.

“You’ll have to face us!”

“Hey! That’s not going to happen! They’re not the enemy!”

Clark was desperately trying to calm the bloodthirsty children. Col was so relieved, he felt as though his knees would give way.

“I’m sorry. They insisted they come along and would not listen to me...I told them to wait in the public wheat granary.”

“It’s all right.”

“And...what on earth is going on? Where are Sharon and the others?”

Col tried to inform Clark of the situation in response, but his brain was barely functioning.

And it was much too painful to leave Sharon with nothing but the oh-so-faint thread of hope and tell Clark and the rest to run.

“Well...”

“Clark, was it?”

He heard Yagine’s voice from behind him.

“Your Grace!”

“If you want to do anything to help Sharon, then the best thing is to follow our orders without question. We will arrange for your safe escape and so that you may live on.”

The information was so sudden that Clark could only stand there frozen in place, his mouth half-open.

“Are these the children from your orphanage?”

Regardless of Clark’s reaction, Yagine smiled at all the children he was trying to save, and the children looked back at him with eyes filled with hostility.

Yagine barely seemed to mind and stayed smiling.

“Eve here will take care of your living expenses for the time being. But I’m sure you must be anxious about the future, so I’ll give you a letters patent.”

As though finally swallowing what had been caught in his throat, Clark’s

Adam's apple moved as he gulped before he spoke.

"Please wait, Your Grace. I have no idea what you're talking about...And I am a simple pastor. What would I do with a letters—?"

"You will no longer be a pastor," Yagine said, a hint of mischief in his voice, and extended his hand as though giving the sacrament. "Under the patronage and marvels of God, and in the name of Fras Yagine, archbishop of the Rausbourne diocese, I name you as abbot of a new monastery."

"...What?"

"I give you a letters patent for the construction of a new monastery. Run your orphanage from there. The Church will not find fault with a monastery. I'm sure Eve will donate a great sum of money for the operating costs."

They turned around and Eve, leaning against the wall, arms folded, scrunched up her face in displeasure.

"If you teach those brats how to read and write and make useful people out of them, then I'll pay."

Yagine was not someone who was content to simply sit and contemplate—he was someone who had made his way through the world.

"Now, let us prepare. We can't flee hardship by parting the sea like in the scripture, but escaping by going underground is rather similar," Yagine said particularly cheerfully, clapping his hands. "What is it now? God speaks of timeliness. Without the right actions, the right time, and the right place, they can turn into misdeeds."

Clark and the children could still be saved now.

Overwhelmed, Clark nodded in response to the archbishop, and while he was slow, he gave orders to the children.

"What will you do, Twilight Cardinal?" Yagine asked, and Col was at a loss for words. "Personally, I would like you to stay in the city and reason with the king or somebody on Sharon's behalf. You have someone from the royal family backing you, isn't that right?"

"That'll be Hyland. She's an illegitimate child, but she's proven herself. She's

got a lot of friends inside the Kingdom.”

When Eve explained as such, Yagine smiled, relieved.

“I see. That’s great. Speak of me as unfavorably as you wish, and say that Sharon and the others ultimately had no choice but to rise up. I won’t deny it, and I’ll report the same to the pope.”

That was how it had to be.

A voice piped up right when Col was about to slowly nod in defeat.

“Sharon isn’t escaping with us?”

It was Clark.

“They’re staying in the city...? But they’re right there!”

While the children stood in shock, Clark rushed over.

“Clark, I—”

“Your Grace! What are you thinking?! Please open the door! We can still save —”

Clark held fast onto Yagine, gripping his collar, and Eve’s guards wrestled with him, trying to peel him away.

Col had been through the same conversation just a moment ago. All he could do was look at Clark as he yelled, knowing it was fruitless.

Col had been persuaded by logic, and he had nodded.

But Clark loved Sharon. He had probably rushed through the underground passages full of hope.

How terrible was the despair of being pulled away from her with only a single door between them?

Perhaps he shouldn’t have called Clark over?

As he considered all that, some rough fur brushed up against his dangling hand.

“...”

Myuri looked up at him with her red eyes.

The sun rose in the east, rivers always flowed downstream, and mountains never moved.

Her silent, wordless eyes told him as such.

“Your Grace!” Clark yelled as he collapsed in the middle of the hall.

Col could claim he had made the right choice.

But people did not live on logic alone. If everything could be solved with logic, then things would never have devolved this far in the first place, and people were not that smart.

Col recalled when he had Sharon ride on his shoulder in bird form, walking around town dressed as a noble.

People mistook him for someone of high standing and opened the way for him out of fear.

Arugo had said the world was made up of so many of those kinds of layers, and that this cathedral was as massive and palatial as it was precisely because of those human qualities.

Did doing the right thing always make one right?

That couldn't be true.

Not only were humans imperfect, but so was the world itself.

Poor souls would always end up getting crushed beneath this warped milling stone they called life.

Yagine was trying to persuade Clark as he sat on the ground in tears, and Eve was commanding her guards to begin preparations to escape.

Myuri stood beside Col, there to support him until the end.

This was one of many endings.

The only thing that did not satisfy him was how selfish he himself was.

“Stand now. You will be the abbot of a monastery from now on. Stay dignified, lest you lose your followers.”

Yagine urged Clark to stand, who did so with unsteady feet.

“P-please, just one last time...let me see her...”

Clark murmured, but Yagine shook his head. It was a slow but firm gesture.

“You cannot. If we open this door, it may lead to war. Even if I announce to the soldiers that it would not, how much would they believe my words? The tax collectors have risen up together with weapons in hand. That can be for nothing but storming the walls. It is sad, but when an evil man clasps his hands in prayer, our human eyes only see a pious act, and the opposite is true, too.”

Clark closed his eyes and hung his head.

“Besides, the Twilight Cardinal will be on your side. I’m sure you will be able to save them.”

No matter how he thought about it, there was no way he could give a clear answer.

But did Col have any other choice but to respond like this?

“Yes, of course.”

Yagine’s weary smile seemed to be telling him he could not turn white into black, and it had a hint of ruefulness, as if he could tell what Col was thinking.

How many lies could he feed Sharon and the other tax collectors? Could he denounce Yagine as evil and claim they had no choice but to come to the cathedral?

Even though he knew that was the only way to save them, it was at this crucial moment that he wondered if lying was the right thing to do.

If he acknowledged that, it would also mean acknowledging to a certain degree that it was fine for the Church to deliberately overlook all the vices and evils that had been going on within its organization.

More importantly, there was no guarantee that he would be able to save them even after all that.

It was so stupid.

It was so irritating how people prioritized ceremony and looks over being able to tell each other their true feelings, which made Col want to hate this

imperfect and stupid world that God had created.

“Now, it may be a thorny path, but this, too, is a trial of God.”

The only salvation to be found here was how Yagine was setting an example for Clark’s future.

Clark and the others should be able to safely escape, at the very least, and there was no need to worry about their livelihood in the future. The other tax collectors escaping by boat could also take shelter in the monastery. Just like Myuri’s fantastic dreamworld, it would be a kind of sanctuary for them, an inviolable place.

And because of that, there were times the tyranny reached an extreme in those places. Col had visited a monastery like that on his travels with Lawrence when he was a child.

Clark would surely create an honest institution.

Col could do nothing more than pray for them as both Clark and Yagine walked away.

And Sharon would also want an official monastic institution for the orphanage, too, surely.

Clark had said that Sharon noticed there had been donations from the cathedral but stayed quiet about it. Perhaps she thought somewhere deep inside that the priests recognized it as an official orphanage.

He could only imagine how the tax collectors were, gathered outside.

What sort of expression was on Sharon’s face at that moment?

Was she cursing the soldiers dispatched by the city council, throwing rocks at them, brandishing her sword above her head in order to rouse her compatriots to make it a successful feint?

But what they harbored in their hearts was not just hatred. There were prayers, and those prayers were a wish to coax out fruit from a seed. Clark and the children would go through the underground passages and meet up with the other tax collectors. From the outside, it would seem like Sharon’s prayers had reached God.

It is all so stupid, Col thought.

“Col. We’re off, too. It’d only get messy if someone sees us here.”

Eve called out to him, and he nodded. They slowly walked off, like criminals.

He then entered the nave and looked up to the image of God made of multicolored glass behind the pulpit.

He heard a muffled *thud* from behind him, which was likely the tax collectors knocking on the cathedral door. It was made of thick wood and reinforced by iron. Only a battering ram could break it.

Yet, by knocking on the door, they were trying to pull everyone’s attention to them.

He could not put their wishes to waste.

“Brother.”

Eve entered the underground passage, and Myuri called to him.

The knocking on the door came again.

He turned to face the secret entrance behind the pulpit, as though desperately trying to ignore the sound.

“Don’t let it bother you.”

The gentleness of the hand Eve placed on his shoulder stung instead.

The feeling they should open the door and the resignation that opening the door would accomplish nothing intermingled with each other.

Yet, as Col’s feet moved to take him down the hidden stairway, Yagine handed Clark something in the corridor below.

“This is the letters patent—it has the name of the previous archbishop on it, not mine. On the slim chance I end up excommunicated, it will still hold power. There’s no need to worry.”

“...Understood.”

Clark dropped to one knee, and like a believer receiving the sacrament, he took the rolled piece of parchment.

That was the presentation of a letters patent for the establishment of a monastery.

Under normal circumstances, it would have been appropriate for Sharon to be here.

They would have received it together as the bell of reconciliation and blessing rang.

When he imagined that, Col could not help the stirring in his heart.

“Let us go.”

Yagine urged Clark onward.

The door to the vault was open.

Everything was hurtling toward a single conclusion.

Col was rooted to the spot, simply not satisfied with the option of moving forward because— “Col!” Eve called to him, her voice annoyed with a hint of anger.

Myuri had also bit onto his clothes, roughly trying to drag him along.

Yagine looked at him apologetically.

Col was the only one out of place here.

But he had a reason for it.

“Please wait.”

When he said that, Eve looked toward the ceiling, Yagine widened his eyes, and Clark looked at him with doubt.

“Grrr...”

Even Myuri was growling, pulling him with such vigor that it almost ripped his sleeve.

He stopped her and held his ground because he had faith.

“Sir Col, I understand your pain...”

“No, that’s not it.”

“It isn’t?”

Col shook his head, closed his eyes, and imagined. He became a bird looking down on the cathedral from the heavens, and he imagined.

At that very moment, in front of the cathedral, Sharon and the tax collectors had taken up camp, holding fast to their positions. The soldiers sent by the city council were gathered around them, long spears in hand, keeping them in check. And even farther out from that, far beyond the city walls, the king’s army was marching toward them.

The king was acting to demonstrate that the tax collectors were bad, Sharon and the rest were acting to demonstrate they were the very ones who should be arrested, and the soldiers from the city council were acting to demonstrate that they were following the king’s orders.

But what about himself?

Could he truly go along with this show?

No, he could not.

There were no ideals to be found here—it was a more superficial, concrete, mundane story.

And if this was something that could be resolved by appearances alone, then there was another way.

In short—

“Can we not see this show from another angle?”

Everyone frowned.

“What are you...?”

“Another angle?”

“...”

All those who were world-weary looked at him at the same time, irritated.

The only one who looked at him with hope was Clark, but that was merely an expression of his intense feelings for Sharon and not any expectations for Col’s ability.

Yet, once Col thought of something, he could not get it out of his head.

“The monastery,” he murmured, and Eve, Yagine, and Myuri all exchanged glances. “It’s the monastery. That letters patent.”

Col pointed, and everyone’s eyes turned to Clark’s hand.

“There is a reason—a legitimate, justifiable reason for Sharon and the others to gather at the cathedral!”

When he yelled, Eve scratched her head. She looked at him like a drunk who was shouting about seeing spirits.

“Col, calm down. You’re just confused right—”

“Ooooooooooh!!!”

It was Yagine who howled.

“God! O God! Yes! God, you have shown me the way!”

Yagine turned to the heavens, his massive stature tottering as he rushed toward Col, moving so quickly that Myuri didn’t have enough time to step between them despite being on guard.

It was possible to call what Col received an embrace, but it was best described as getting charged.

“O God! I thank you! I thank you for sending me this astute young man!”

After Yagine hugged him hard enough to lift him off the ground, he turned around.

“Yes! That is what we can do! There is a way to solve this by opening the cathedral doors and taking in Sharon!”

Impossible, Eve wordlessly muttered, but Col picked up where Yagine had left off.

“There is exactly one situation that can show the cathedral did not succumb to the tax collectors and that the tax collectors did not come with the intention of using violence, even if we do open the door!”

“Are you insane? The tax collectors are actually out there, gathered and armed. If that’s not an uprising, then what is it?”

When Eve asked, Col took a deep breath and answered:

“A petition.”

People had their strengths and weaknesses. If Eve had something she wanted to do, she would think of a way to weave a web of machinations that would eventually make things land in her lap of their own accord. But there were more straightforward ways of colliding headfirst with things in the world. And sometimes that became violence.

It was because people were stirred to action by intense feelings.

“A petition for the cathedral to build a monastery just for the orphans. It’s been several years since the Church has stopped all services in the Kingdom. They’ve been waiting for such a long time, and they simply couldn’t wait anymore. If they wanted the doors to open to have their wishes heard, to be shown mercy in the name of God, *it’s only natural* they would act a bit rough, yes?”

“Wait, but...”

Eve recoiled, and Yagine spoke.

“Eve, we need your assistance. If we can say that you, former noble of the Kingdom, backed the tax collectors in order to return home loaded with honors, then the papal office will look on you more favorably. You understand what I mean, don’t you?”

Just like Eve had said herself, she could change her standing as easily as a bat flitted back and forth. If someone who was possibly an ally of the Church like herself was to deeply insinuate herself among the tax collectors, who were nothing but nuisances, then the Church would surely find peace of mind for the time being.

But no, the reason Eve looked like she had swallowed a bug was because she had realized the implicit meaning in Yagine’s words—a command to bargain with the papal office in order to calm them down.

“...This’ll make me money, will it?”

Yagine struck his massive, drumlike belly and raised both hands.

“Of course it will!”

Yagine got right to the point. He suddenly turned to Col and smiled like a bandit.

“The Twilight Cardinal is here! Be it monastery or orphanage, I’m sure the donations will come pouring in from all kinds of factions looking for protection!”

Col had come to Eve, ready to feast on mud if it meant saving Sharon and the tax collectors.

It would be wrong if he ran away now. “...It sounds like my name holds quite the influence.” Col turned to Eve as he spoke, albeit timidly.

Eve’s face went bright red, and after she widened her eyes, she yelled, “Do what you want!”

While she was used to cornering others in arguments, perhaps she was not used to the same being done to herself.

Yagine childishly shrugged and called over Clark, who stood there in shock.

“You are the star here, Clark.”

“Wh—? Me?”

“Don’t you have feelings for Sharon? As her father, I know she’ll be in good hands with you.”

Clark’s eyes went rounder than a fish’s eyes as he stared at Yagine.

“But we will need direction in order to quell the scene. We will need a show to quiet everyone outside. Any ideas?”

Yagine turned to look at Col suggestively.

This was the man who fell in love with a golden eagle whose fully spread wings could cover an entire forest. He had likely “directed” miracles once or twice in his life before becoming the archbishop.

And Col could not help but remember who it was beside him.

“...Leave it to me.”

When he answered, Myuri briefly whined in displeasure, but he reached

down to pet the back of her neck to quiet her.

Col felt slightly depressed thinking about how much she would complain afterward, but when he thought about how they might have gone straight through the tunnels to escape, he was ready and willing to bend to all her cajoling.

“All right, then, get ready! This will be our first divine business in years! Get ready to receive this petition!”

For the sake of moving forward.

For the sake of fighting against fate, to not be swept away.

“Twilight Cardinal—no, Col,” Yagine said. “Thank you.”

All Col could say in response was, “I still don’t know if it’ll work yet,” but Myuri, apparently unhappy with his lack of confidence, nibbled at his leg.

Epilogue



EPILOGUE

And thus the grand cathedral doors were opened. The house of God granted its mercy to those who came armed, all for the sake of the helpless, orphaned children...

Once the tale was over, a strummed chord echoed throughout the atrium. A great number of guests had been enraptured by the minstrel's tale.

But there were still plenty of people who looked on in doubt—had the cathedral not given in to evil ways, and was it not a den of evils forsaken by God? Oh, but oh!

Da-na-naaaaaan.

This sort of program could be seen all over Rausbourne, and no matter where a traveler went, they would likely find the same. Col felt like he would lose his appetite again if he had to hear that story once more, but there was someone else there to eat his meal for him.

"It's getting cold, Brother."

"Go ahead."

He passed the plate with the mountain of mutton to Myuri, who bit into it with glimmering eyes.

"This is my treat. I doubt you'll be able to eat it all, even if you pace yourself."

The one who smiled was Eve, and the one ordering some more meat was Hyland. Once Hyland was done ordering directly from the owner of the Golden Fern, she spoke with a bitter smile with regards to the minstrel's melody, which they could hear from the window that faced the atrium.

"I have to say, artists are truly gifted, aren't they?"

She was not talking about the minstrel's voice but the miracle he was singing about.

“Even the silliest of tricks look like a miracle depending on perspective. Both the papal office and the Kingdom will have to stay silent after seeing something like that,” Eve said as she looked at Myuri, but Myuri continued to eat, pretending not to notice. Or perhaps she was not pretending—maybe she really did not.

“A whole flock of birds flew out carrying the Church’s banner from the cathedral, right? I can’t believe I didn’t get to see that...,” Hyland said, genuinely disappointed. “And all the stray dogs and pigs and chickens came from all over town to bless the event, didn’t they? You can find plenty of people making their animals do tricks on the street corners, but I’ve never seen anything so majestic before.”

“Lord Hyland, keep in mind how light my wallet got because of it.”

While that was an accurate account of what had happened, there were several layers to the truth.

To those who could see only the outermost layers, the tale went that the tax collectors had stood up for the orphans, and when the cathedral accepted them, a miracle occurred thanks to God’s blessing.

Those who peeled a layer back thought that Eve had paid a sum of money, scraping together some artists, and directed a miracle in order to calm the whole commotion down. That was the explanation they had given the royals, including Hyland. They did that because there was a need to hide the true identity of Myuri and the others like her and, more importantly, to inform them it was not truly a miracle. They would be needing the Church to fight and fix their evildoings in the near future. They would be getting their priorities backward if the Church hesitated to fight because they were reeling from a divine miracle.

And peeling back the last layer showed the innermost story.

Myuri had called on the stray dogs to gather the other animals, and when Sharon received a letter from one of the dogs, she agreed to take a chance on the silly display, gathered the birds, and directed the miracle.

After the banner flew out from the cathedral over the people gathered there with weapons and torches, Clark and Yagine emerged, permit in hand. Clark

publicly received the permit from Yagine, and then he handed it over to Sharon.

While everyone stood there in bewilderment, aside from a few key players, they forcibly overwrote and imbued new meaning into the whole situation.

The cathedral had accepted the tax collectors' petition, and God had granted them all his mercy.

There was a grand and sturdy front, one that had nothing to do with the politics of the Kingdom or anything like that, but it was all for the innocent children whom God would surely save as long as they followed his teachings.

And then, after the cathedral bells rang, a single white dove flew down and landed on Sharon's shoulder.

The city council soldiers, still without a clue as to what was going on, fell to the ground to grovel because they interpreted it as God's will.

Or perhaps it was a way for them to placate themselves as they were bewildered by the awesome happenings around them.

"I guess I'm saddened most by the fact the Twilight Cardinal's name wasn't loudly associated with this." Hyland's tone was joking.

All Col had done was think up the way to do it, and he had not been officially present.

But he needed to lend a hand so that the new monastery could get off the ground.

"And you're really not taking on the job?" Hyland looked at him with sad eyes, and Col failed to find words. "I know Clark and Sharon and the rest want you to."

"No, I'm still not suited for such a thing yet. I'm only receiving their support in the end."

Clark would be the abbot of the new monastery, and Sharon, who would be headmaster of the new orphanage, had asked Col to take on the role of prior.

The foundation of the new monastery would be built with Eve's money, Hyland's land, and the cathedral's permit, but it was obvious to all that it stood in a delicate position between the Kingdom and the Church.

They needed someone who could act as the keystone, so they would not be so easily exploited.

They decided that would be the name of the Twilight Cardinal, but he firmly turned down the offer to be appointed the monastery's prior.

Instead, they settled on him receiving support from the monastery for his aspirations to walk the theological path.

He had made a promise that he would gift a copy of the common-language translation of the scripture in the place of a relic in order to attract worshippers and their donations.

With that in their possession, the monastery's authority would grow, and many priests would come to consult it.

"And even with the scripture, I think I am being overestimated. The translation is not because of anything I've done alone but rather the result of the cooperation among many high-ranking clergymen here in the Kingdom."

"You need people to read your writings. The passages you wrote are pretty popular here in Rausbourne."

It was Clark who had spread them around...which meant that he had nowhere to run.

He would have to stay uncomfortable like this for a little while longer.

"More importantly, how are we for time? Were Clark and Miss Sharon not departing today?" Col asked.

"Oh right. I was having so much fun watching this girl eat that I forgot. Sheesh, I'm hoping they put this building on easy ground. Money'll be flying out of my pockets."

"The construction of the inn and the permits for the gate town will take care of you. That should be good income for you."

"I certainly hope so, Lord Hyland."

Eve and Hyland's exchange was frank yet somewhat thorny, but they were taking on a partnership in order to support Sharon's monastery.

“All right, I’ll call the carriage.”

Hyland stood, and Eve followed suit.

“Come on, Myuri.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Let her eat.”

“We’ll have them wrap some for you to take home.”

Eve and Hyland seemed to be enjoying themselves, but Col was only ever embarrassed as her older brother.

Once the two left the room, he looked to Myuri with a sigh.

“Myuri, why have you been in such a bad mood?”

Right after the whole commotion ended, Myuri seemed to be in a great mood.

She was delighted they had come up with a way to save Sharon and the rest, allowing the whole incident to wrap up rather nicely.

But then suddenly, her mood had soured several days ago.

If his guess was correct, it was because he had turned down the work as prior at the monastery.

“Brother, you dummy.”

Col unconsciously rubbed his neck, feeling like the way she ripped into the meat was like her ripping into his throat. Myuri swallowed, reaching for a new piece as she spoke, all the while sprinkling plenty of the black pepper Eve had prepared for them.

“That chicken and that failure of yours are gonna live together, right?! So why can’t we do that?!”

So that really is the reason, Col thought as he turned away.

Myuri groaned and glared at him as she ate.

The answer was a given.

“Monasteries are places of prayer and contemplation. You cannot live in a place like that.”

“Why?!”

“What do you mean, why?”

He gave a tired sigh, took the soft linen cloth in his hands, and held it up to Myuri’s chin.

“You cannot eat meat like this there. Are you okay with that?”

She had stuffed her mouth so full of meat, it practically changed the shape of her face, and still she continued munching.

He knew she was doing it out of spite, but that also meant she was well.

“And even if we did live together,” he said, placing his elbow on the table, leaning into the girl who sat next to him, “we cannot get married. Are you okay with that?”

Myuri stared at him, chewed her meat, then swallowed it.

Her lips pouted in a triangular shape.



“No. But you didn’t turn down the chicken’s request because you want to marry me quickly.”

He smiled bitterly at her accurate remark, and he sat up straight.

“It’s still too early for me to enter a place of thought and prayer. And this entire incident has made me keenly aware of how big an impact I’ve made with everything I’ve done so far. I cannot leave that alone, and I need to seriously consider if what I am doing is truly correct.”

Even though he thought the Church had no room to make excuses, they had their own situation to consider, and even the selfish merchants had a point that he needed to think about.

The world was filled with so many things he needed to know and learn.

“Brother, you dummy. If you want to do the right thing, then you don’t need to think that hard about it.”

And of course, Myuri had her own excuses.

“Is there anything righter than taking me for your wife?”

Myuri, rambunctious as usual.

When Col offered her a weary smile, she immediately glared at him.

There were those who were trifled with by their fate and those who railed against theirs.

Despite how powerless he was, there should still be things he could do.

“Well, you still weren’t any match for Uncle Luward, but I guess you were pretty cool this time around,” Myuri said as she tossed away a sheep bone that had been licked clean. It landed on the plate with a satisfying sound. “I suppose I’ll accompany you on your travels if you keep showing me how cool you can be.”

You’re the one who came along without asking me first was something he would never say out loud.

He opened up the linen in his hand, refolded it, then lightly pressed it to the corners of Myuri’s mouth.

“I cannot promise that, but I’m hoping to be less pathetic going forward.”

Myuri let him wipe her mouth as she made a matter-of-fact look and then said, “I guess I’ll need to go along with you, then.”

Her sharp fangs glinted from beneath the raised corner of her mouth.

The only reason he had been able to stand tall before the great commotion in this city was, without a doubt, Myuri. As a result, the Kingdom and the Church did not go straight to war, and Sharon had gotten a chance to have a proper talk with Yagine.

And Col managed to get through it all without having to swallow only the bitter parts of reality.

“Indeed.”

“Indeed, indeed. Always and forever!”

Myuri spoke delightedly and chuckled.

They could hear the minstrel’s song coming in from the window of the private room.

When Col stood, he took Myuri’s hand and lightly pulled it.

“Now, we must get ready for our next journey.”

Myuri’s red eyes glinted and she squeezed his hand hard in return, standing up with great vigor.

“I wanna go someplace with lots of good food next!”

“We’re not on vacation.”

“I’m not vacationing; I’m enjoying life!”

“And who taught you to say that...?”

“Hmph!”

Myuri, always the mischievous girl she was, flashed a toothy grin.

Her smile was full of confidence that the next day would be fun, and Col could not help but smile back.

They opened the door and headed out into the hall.

They would surely face troubles in the future, and they would surely find pain.

But he had a feeling they could simply overcome these things one at a time.

“C’mon, Brother! Our next adventure!”

That was because he had such a reassuring companion beside him.

As he closed the door, Myuri clung to his arm, and then they walked off together.

All they left behind in the room was the cheerful melody of the minstrel and bare sheep bones.

Col thought that perhaps it was a hint of what was to come, and he was okay with that.

AFTERWORD

I'm sure you've heard of manuscript deadlines that just keep getting extension after extension—I think I've set a new personal record this time. Hello there again—this is Hasekura.

I was actually planning on releasing *Wolf & Parchment 4* before *Spice & Wolf 21*, but my completed manuscript was not so great...so I had to practically rewrite the entire thing. But of course that isn't something that can happen right away. Instead I used a little trick of writing and publishing the manuscript for Volume 21 to buy myself some time.

I guaranteed myself some time, but I came across some difficulties while rewriting, and my extensions were vanishing before my eyes, so I'm writing this afterword now in the editorial department. I am deeply sorry to all those involved.

But I think the content got much better from the rewrite! The story hasn't changed much, but as I was writing, I was surprised to see how much things would change by changing several elements here and there. I feel like it would be interesting if I uploaded the rejected manuscript somewhere so that we could compare.

Now, while that was going on with this manuscript, I was working on what would be the *Spice & Wolf* VR at the same time (and I'm still working on it!). Myuri and Col from *Wolf & Parchment* won't be in it, but Myuri's parents, Holo and Lawrence, will be in this VR animation. We tried our hand at crowdfunding starting at the end of last year (2018) until this year, and we received so much support. Thank you so much! There are still things to do in preparation for the work and the merchandise, but I think we'll make something great—I'm very excited, too!

However, I cannot deny that I was overwhelmed with the writing time for that project, which delayed this manuscript, so I am so distressed right now. Not only that, but there are also other things I want to create, so I am a little

fidgety...

But Heisei is ending, so I'm hoping to go full steam ahead!

I am hoping to release volumes of both *Parchment* and *Spice* quicker this time, so I'd be happy if you stuck with me.

I'll see you in the next volume!

Isuna Hasekura

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)